



Chain Reaction by Fourth Horse

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Summary: "Of all the floors that existed, of all the shielded windows she could see, there was one light in one window that remained on. Just one." Old ghosts come back knocking, and growing up was never meant to be easy. (Established Mileven)

1. In The Air Tonight

It'd been a routine almost every night for the past month.

He was out like a light by 10pm. Long days at the station, dealing with trivial matters because *nothing* happened in Hawkins anymore. Not since the public scandal of Barbara Holland's death, not since that gateway to the ninth circle of frozen *hell* was shut. It was now squabbles between neighbors, rowdy teenagers loitering, an old woman walking her poodle that happened to look into someone's window and see more than what she bargained for (and claimed it to be 'indecent exposure'). As time passed he slept with more ease, although he knew to exercise *caution* – he had adopted a teenager, after all. A female one.

Not only that, but female teenager with a very *severe* telekinetic prowess smitten with a boy since the precipice of adolescence. Jim Hopper wasn't an idiot. He knew kids this age – as he was one of them a long, long time ago (Michael Wheeler would sometimes argue in a *galaxy far, far away*). They were diabolical masterminds driven by hormones with a honed skill in sneaking out and they'd done it *many* times, some of them they never even realized he knew.

But this wasn't a night for a romantic rendezvous in the back of a car, where the windows fogged from body heat and the vehicle bounced with the rhythm of their motion.

For the past month she waited until her father (adopted, but never the less, her father) was dead asleep. For the past month she would pluck a lone cigarette from his pack, and she would discretely leave their woodly cabin for a walk. Most would be afraid to wander around in the darkness alone, but she didn't consider this darkness – not like the darkness she'd come to know. Stars like fireflies were scattered through the midnight sky, the waning moon bright. The air was crisp and clean with spring climate. Pollen too, although she'd been a lucky one to avoid the condition of *allergies* unlike other members of the party.

There was an uphill hike she endured every night she left the cabin. Up, up, where the elevation made her ears *pop* a little uncomfortably.

Eleven knew the sight that would let her know she arrived. It was high, overseeing the trees that just newly became green again. In the very center was a building several stories tall with fences fortified by coils and coils of barbed wire.

This was her spot for the past month, to view something that was a literal nightmare constructed by everything real and material. Once, she thought it was home.

Eleven didn't realize how much bullshit that was until later. She never knew what home *really* was, not until she was pulled from a storm and into the basement of a completely strange boy – and she came to the conclusion that *home* wasn't a place. It was the people. In her case, that completely strange *boy*.

And this building that she once falsely thought of as *home* was supposed to be void of all light. Shut down, abandoned, empty. But one night she felt it calling to her, like a siren's song in the form of night terrors, and when she finally listened and saw it again with her own two very brown eyes, her gut churned. It made Eleven queasy.

Of all the floors that existed, of all the shielded windows she could see, there was one light in one window that remained on.

Just one.

It stayed that way for the past month. And for most days in the past month she'd escape the cabin, carefully step over the strategically placed tripwire (Hopper was ever the paranoid), and made her way up so high to watch. She would stand at the edge of the hill, take the spare lighter she'd once found lost in the cushions, and fire up the lone cigarette she'd stolen.

And she would watch, to see if anything ever came of the one room lit. As far she knew?

Nothing ever did, but something told her it was only a matter of time.

There was nothing extraordinarily different about the next morning.

The Chief suspected not a thing, and if he did she had no way of telling. *That's* what had her often nervous. Hops was always so good with keeping up a facade if necessary (after all he *did* hide her for three hundred and fifty three days without telling a soul), but if he disapproved any of her behavior at all? He'd have very little issue vocalizing it without filter.

Mike always picked her up at the same time at the same spot off the beaten path, rusted car parked and waiting. Age did away with everything that had once been charmingly boyish about him; freckles that powdered his nose multiplied, his hair remained forever shaggy, and that body grew and grew like a beanstalk. They kissed one another sweetly like they always did in the morning, and he rattled on and on about how the end of the year was approaching. Their *final* year, with their last finals and college referrals, how he bounced between deciding what major he wanted to study and where. He sounded so *confident* about the future, and she smiled her dimpled smile and nibbled on a plain waffle while he conversed enthusiastically.

Sometimes he could get so wrapped up in what was going on that she thought it as a blessing in disguise. According to Dustin's eloquence, graduating high school was *kind of a big deal* and was the start of their adulthood - whatever that really meant, anyway.

"And *then* I was thinking about how a dorm would be just dumb, and a waste of money, and I don't even know if I *want* to share a space with a total stranger," Mike continued rambling, parking the vehicle in the senior lot. "I've got enough scholarships coming in to have some money left over and, well - there's probably a cheap apartment I can get at Indianapolis."

He took a minute to clear his throat because he was just now *realizing* he was segueing into the part of cohabitation. Like, *moving in together*. Much like graduation, it was *kind of a big deal* but she was Eleven, and he was Mike, and they'd gone through more than adults had when they were *twelve*. "You know, for the both of us. If - that's cool?"

Real smooth.

His question stirred her from her gaze out the window and she

blinked those brown eyes wide. "Um, what?"

Are you even listening - "An apartment," he repeated with a frown. "For the both of us. Are you okay? Is something wrong? Shit, I was probably talking way too much, I'm sor-"

"No, no!" El interjected. "No, sorry, I *listened*. Promise." It wasn't a lie; she heard every word and was trying to process (albeit distractedly). "Sorry, I didn't sleep all that...well." *Also not a lie*. Sneaking out to stare down her literal torture chamber, plus the nightmares that clung to her even when she did get a wink of sleep didn't exactly equal luxurious resting. "You - you want to take me with you?"

Mike's brows furrowed for two reasons. One, he felt like she hadn't been sleeping well for a *while*. He knew about the nightmares. He also knew there wasn't a damn thing he could do about them - he wasn't *there* to comfort her. Hopper wasn't keen on co-ed sleepovers. Neither were his parents, although they'd all probably suspected that line they all feared would be crossed too early had *already* been crossed.

His hand found hers to squeeze, thumb grazing her knuckles. "I know it's - well, it's a lot to ask, and you'll have to probably talk to the chief about it, but we're both going to be eighteen. Legal adults. If we can go to war, we can make the decision to live together. Right?" Mike swallowed nervously. "I mean, unless you don't want to and I -"

"I want to," she interrupted quietly. And as dumb as it sounded, his heart fluttered. "I *want* to." El brought their hands to her mouth and she kissed his, mouth forming the smile he adored so much. It helped settle a concern she had when all the talk about college started popping up, and phrases like *out of state* were being tossed around. They urged her to apply to places too, but all the exams involved and the decisions required were too overwhelming - she didn't think she could decide what she wanted to do with the rest of her life when she had just started living it.

But Mike assured her it wasn't for everyone. That they'd figure *something* out. And apparently he had. She liked this plan of his so far. A lot. "All we'd need is a one bedroom," he mused, luring her closer with their tangled fingers. "We'd sleep in the same bed. Then

I'd get to be there when those bad dreams come to you. That's why you haven't been sleeping well, isn't it?"

El bit the inside of her cheek. "Sort of."

"Sort of?"

Friends don't lie, spoken in the voice of a pre-teen Mike Wheeler, echoed in her mind.

It's not a lie, she argued with the voice. *But it's not the whole truth either, and it's not fair.*

"Complicated," she answered finally, wincing.

Mike didn't like that answer. "EL."

Before he was even able to pull an explanation from here there was an interruption - in the form of someone banging on the windows with beaming excitement. *Dustin*. A brawny curly-haired teddy bear that tried too damn hard but was still always loveable. "Hey! Lovebirds! Keep making eyes at each other and you're going to be late."

Dustin's greet from Mike was a glare that could burn holes in into his skin.

"Oops," he blinked. "Did I interrupt a moment?"

"We'll talk," she promised with a dreaded sigh, and kissed the corner of his mouth. "*Later*." Mike had that look to him, infamously stubborn - like he wasn't about to let this conversation go - but the feeling that she wasn't ready to discuss it yet wasn't lost to him. He didn't resist much when she writhed her hand from him go out of the car. Mike wasn't far behind her, and begrudgingly let her meet up with Maxine up ahead.

Meanwhile, Dustin stayed behind and let out an awkward whistle. "Seriously, dude. My bad?"

Mike shook his head. "It's nothing."

"Trouble in paradise?"

"Actually," Mike blinked. "Not at all." *Later* had been a promise he'd hold her to. They never broke one another's word, and he (often) had to remind himself that it was *okay* if she needed space. Didn't mean El needed him any less, and he discovered she liked to sit on things until she found the best way to explain it. Articulation had been a huge challenge for her at first, but her vocabulary had expanded and her sentences weren't as choppy. More use of words meant less bouts of telekinetic frustration. That had been her 'go-to' method of self-expression.

Not that it wasn't *cool*. It just didn't fit the bill of 'suburban teenage girl' they were all trying to help her sell.

"She agreed to move in with me," he confessed to Dustin as they walked inside. Not once did he lose sight of her, either - her soft brown curls, a glimpse leather she insisted in wearing. Punk wasn't the exact style she adopted, but it was definitely punk-*ish*. They'd made it to the lockers to prepare for the brunt of the day, switching out textbooks and notes. "In Indianapolis. I didn't plan to ask her today but it kind of just..."

"Word vomit," Dustin finished for him with a chuckle. "Congrats, man, but did you really doubt she'd say yeah?"

"No." It was mostly convincing. Insecurity was always nestled within him somewhere even if he knew it was logically stupid, but he couldn't help it. "I mean, it's rude to assume. We'd have to hash details out with the Chief." For obvious reasons. He wasn't just protective, he was *paranoid*. Also for obvious reasons. "But she can't stay here forever. Not if we want something more normal for her."

Part of him would miss Hawkins, yet he was excited to kind of do his own thing - with her. Something new. Something them.

"At least you two figured shit out." Dustin adjusted that cap of his in the locker mirror before shutting it. "Max and Lucas are *still* going down each other's throats about things out without breaking up and it's getting pretty angsty and tense there, if you know what I mean."

Oh, he knew. It was why he and El weren't velcroed to one another like usual (let's just say that Mike had a form of separation anxiety thanks to this fucking place and the fucking government and the, you know, the fucking monsters that lived in an echo world). Maxine pulled at the only other female member of the party and Lucas, well, he pulled at the guys for rants and advice.

It was an uncomfortable divide among them. Eleven wasn't a bucket of infinite worldly wisdom, but she listened well *and* was the only other girl the redhead knew in what could be considered a serious relationship. Her way of looking at things were simplistic and innocently *no bullshit*. Exactly what someone like Max needed.

Mike peeked around his friend. That flaming mane of curls was easily spotted and next to her was his girlfriend, and all he knew was that Max's mouth was moving at speed faster than light while El try not to look to overwhelmed with the morning's rant.

"I gave him my piece of advice," he sighed, shutting his locker. As another member of the party also in what was considered a serious relationship, Lucas thought he was also well equipped to offer some kind of insight. "It's up to them to decide what they want."

"What would you do in his place?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know," Dustin shrugged. "Would you want to deal with the distance or just say 'fuck it' because you're both so paranoid the other's going to find someone better?"

"I've run hypothetical scenarios like that in my head before, but never once figured out what the outcome of any of them were," Mike admitted with a wince. "So hell if I know, Dustin."

"Consider yourself lucky, my friend." He patted Mike's shoulder. "Then again anyone around here would be too stupid to compare their relationship with yours." Not that most knew the oh so famous story of Mike Wheeler and Jane Hopper (*Jane* rolled off their tongue so weirdly, and she preferred them to call her El anyway), riddled with sacrificial badassery in defeating demogorgons or their whole

'woe is me, radioed you for like, a year' part when finally reunited. "Hell, I'm surprised you didn't just go ahead and pop the *other* question."

"What other -" Dustin's hand was swatted away offensively when the realization hit. "Jesus christ, shut up. No." Pink colored Mike's cheeks a little. "Someday, sure. When I'm not figuring out possible rent or tuition and stop fucking *grinning* like that, Dustin. Jeez. Mind your business."

"Haven't seen your face that red since we walked in on -"

"*Shut the fuck up.*"

Study Hall, she discovered, was kind of a bullshit class meant to fill in the gaps between remaining core classes senior year. But it had become one of El's favorite classes because it was, for the most part, quiet - partly due to how everyone was suddenly fixated on their grades like it was a life or death situation. Notes were passed among classmates, whispers about a *one last hoorah* at Jennifer Hayes' house. It was meant to be a big, sordid affair but all of that information wasn't really meant for someone like her.

Popularity wasn't in her cards. Neither were impeccable grades, although hers were passably average. None of those things bothered her much. Social hierarchies in schools were strange, and while there'd been something of a scandalous hype with the sudden appearance of the Chief of Police's teenage daughter (that no one ever heard of before so there must have *obviously* been a scandal), she blended in with the crowd most ignored: the nerds.

Her nerds.

Will was in the class too. He kept her company in the seat next to her, and she'd spend his time filling the pages of his sketchbook with images from his mind. Sometimes they were adorable comic strips with characters based off his friends. Other times they were hauntingly dark, illustrations of the horrors his mind recalled. Those came from a bad place. Coming from a bad place, being a victim of monsters too - El understood.

You can't forget bad places.

"Are you okay?"

He was using dark colors again. Crimson, indigo, black. Erratic lines and heavy shadows. Will didn't look *upset*, but his thoughts seemed to be running deep today. "Yeah," he finally said after a minute. "I am. Just thinking."

There was a paperback book on psychology (and a small dictionary next to her, to look up all complicated words she didn't quite understand) she closed. "Bad things?"

He shared a smile, and it wasn't terribly morose. Will had retained a much more boyish look to him than the rest of the guys. Always the smallest, always the one most prone to getting picked on. "About bad things, but not in a bad way. If that makes sense."

El raised a curious brow. "Not really."

"It's about this idea I have," he went on to quietly clarify. "About everything that happened. Everything we're not supposed to talk about. Everything not everyone's supposed to know, but it doesn't change that it *happened*. The school I'm going to requires we work on one long-term project and I think mine will be like... a graphic novel, of what we all went through. Some details changed so it won't be the *exact* thing, but that way the truth will be out there. Somehow."

"Is that – are you allowed to do that?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

There was a pause as she tried to think her feelings into words. "Do you think the bad people will get upset?"

Bad people was her way of referring to the government. Maybe it was better that way; they didn't need to be tossing that word around in school halls like it held no weight.

Will blinked up from his paper, contemplating. "Not if I change things around. I don't think I can get away with doing some kind of autobiographical comic about this place, but we can retell the story

with the same truths. And who says it'll ever get published, anyway?" It was art therapy for Will. He couldn't tell a shrink about his experiences without being locked up or heavily medicated. "I suck at the writing part of it. I'm thinking of asking Mike for some help with all his Dungeon Master experience."

"I think he'd like that. He's going to miss telling his stories."

"And then, of course, I'd consult *you* – because super powers have to be involved somehow," grinned the boy, still hushed. No one ever really paid attention to them here anyway.

El still didn't know what to think about her powers being romanticized into heroism. She never objected, though. In the end being perceived as a super hero was infinitely better than being perceived as a monster, or freak of nature.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you still get nightmares?"

Strange question. Will worried a little. Even though they were the last of the group to officially *meet*, the two of them fell into a very seamless, easy friendship. It wasn't until he laid eyes on her that he even *remembered* who she was, the voice in Castle Byers that told him to *hold on*. In a way it was like they'd known each other the entire time. His mother and Hopper seemed to be pleased with it, especially since the two adults had started to get a little serious in the relationship department.

"Sometimes," he answered. "I'm so used to them now though, they don't even effect me like they used to." No more screaming or cold sweats, but that anvil of dread seemed to stay there forever. "Why? Do you?"

El's response wasn't any different, except it lacked explanation. "Sometimes."

"Did you have some recently?"

"A lot, recently," she sighed. "Maybe it's just my head. Maybe something's wrong with it."

2. Baby Steps

Mike hadn't nagged about the promise she made that morning. He trusted her to follow through with her word – but he had to keep telling himself to *give it time*. It gnawed at him more than he cared to admit, and instead tried to focus on going throughout the day as usual. That meant driving them to his place, entering from the basement door and getting comfortable in an area of the house that while still collected a lot of shitty junk, had also become his lair.

It was where the worn and torn sofa was where his friends lounged on, and the round table of gaming they'd gather around during their free time. It was also home to the infamous fort he'd built for El years ago – he had refused to take it down, even after her return, and they chose to expand it as time progressed to fit their growth spurts. It was a comfortable nest of old pillows and blankets, and a spot for them to nestle in and do productive things like studying and homework.

Or non-productive things that were *ten times* more fun.

Kind of like now.

"We'll probably end up taking the table," he grinned between ticklish kisses as they rested on their sides, bodies like magnets pulling them together, allowing no space in between. "Couch, too, 'til we get something nicer. Guess we'll have to build a fort at some point but I don't know where we would fit that. I mean, I'd kind of like to get an actual *bed*. Not my shitty twin-sized one that barely even fits me."

El was giggling, cheeks dimpled as she smiled and tried to put her hands in front of his face because her *neck*, good god, he knew she was sensitive there. "At least a fort until we can *get* a bed, maybe. Does this mean I get to deal with you farting every day?"

Mike had to pull back a bit because *what*. "Huh?"

"Hops told me once that it's important for couples to get so comfortable they fart around each other. Or generally speaking, just with anyone you live with?"

"I mean – I don't – he's not –"

"He farts in front of me all the time."

"Okay, you're killing the vibe here," he groaned, and it only made her giggling turn into laughter. "I thought you'd be more focused on, you know, the important things."

"Like furniture?" she cocked a brow, wrapping her arms around his neck to yank him back because she wasn't done with the kisses, and his hands started to get a little adventurous. A slip under her blouse, a pluck of her bra against her skin.

"No, that's just practical," he countered, rolling on top of her but using his elbows to support most of his weight. "I *meant* we can do things whenever," a kiss, "wherever," another one followed, this one to her jaw – she quivered and he swelled with pride, "we want, without worrying about whose home or waking someone up."

Thankfully no one was home to risk interruption; his parents were off to their marriage counseling appointment (god knows they desperately needed that), and Holly was out at a friend's. Nancy was out of state, only coming home during breaks and holidays. No one in the family knew about his plans and while his father might be miffed about them dodging tradition – because the *right* way to do things, apparently, was to get married first – his mother wouldn't be too resistant. Fuck tradition, anyway. He was all about doing things *their* way, at whatever pace fit them the best.

El let out a pleasant hum, and while he ghosted her skin with little pecks, she twirled her fingers into his raven hair. "That *is* important," she mused, but she felt immediately how forced the smile following it was.

She bit her lip.

"Mike?"

He knew that tone. She'd said his name in it before, tentative and anxious, and he lifted his head to look at her with unhidden concern. "Yeah?" *Was it something I said?*

"There's a light that's on," she started. "In the lab."

Mike blinked once.

The second time he blinked, his eyes tightened and his brows instantly furrowed as he processed.

Complicated, she had said that morning.

He shifted but didn't move off her, and pulled his hands from underneath her shirt. Instead, his fingers went to her cheek, thumb grazing that soft skin in thought. "Did you..." God, he hoped not. "Did you go there by yourself?"

"I didn't go *in* it by myself. I saw it from a distance, at night. It's dim, and you can't see it during the day, but it's there."

"How long?"

"About a month, I think," she confessed and felt like *shit* about his latest look of surprise. "You know when I get dreams I sometimes slip in and out of that dark place?"

That part wasn't a secret. It was just a *thing* that happened involuntarily every now and again, with one foot in this mental void while the other was still steeped into her own subconscious. It led to nightmares and stumbling onto beings from *both* planes.

Sometimes she'd see her friends, Mike, or family (*Mama*, mostly). Other times she'd see things she wished were just something her mind made up. There wasn't a way of stopping it and she never came in contact with any of them.

Whether or not they knew she was *there* was a question she didn't want the answer to, ever.

"I saw it from there," El tacked on, sighing. "So I had to go see, and I haven't – it's been hard to sleep." His face soon became unreadable and she did not *like* it, not one bit. She liked it even less when he peeled away from her and sat up, and she pushed herself upright to match. "Mike, I'm –"

"Stop," he interrupted, scrubbing a hand down his face. "I'm not mad."

"Liar."

"I'm *annoyed*," Mike made a point to correct. "But I'm not mad, El." He didn't think he could ever be – because he *knew* her. Out of anyone else, Hopper included, there was no one else that knew her like he did. Did he like being in the dark for a month? *Fuck no*. But he also knew sometimes she needed time to come around, and that she always *did*, and she'd never go out and do something too impulsive if it put her in danger (*I can't lose you again*).

Maybe one could argue that getting even in a mile radius of that place was risky as hell for her, but the gravity of what she'd just told him overcame all those petty details.

Despite his claim, all traces of that aforementioned annoyance eventually vanished from his face. "It could be nothing. Maybe. It *has* been shut down for a while. They're probably figuring out a way to repurpose it or something. It'd be *way* too risky to try and finish whatever the hell they started again, right?"

"I don't know," she admitted, tucking wavy strands of her hair behind her ear. Talking about it out loud didn't take the weight of the burden off the shoulders like she thought. Instead it cemented that feeling of dread, because it was acknowledging that all good things *could* come to an end. "I haven't said anything to Hops about it yet. Just you."

El was upset. He noticed how tense she suddenly looked, and the way her nails were scratching at her denim jeans, and the way her shoulders were lifted about an inch higher than usual. It made her look that much smaller and much more *fragile*, even if she could probably lift his very house with her mind alone and chuck it into the next yard.

That's when he pushed her back into the mess of pillows and blankets, the sanctity of their fort, and wrapped his arms around her tightly. "We'll figure it out," he promised, pressing his mouth against her forehead. "Whatever happens. We're not kids anymore."

"I think being kids is what kept us safe back then," she replied

quietly, pulling at the buttons of his shirt. Mike was like an anchor that kept her *here*, in this world – he smelled like his mother's cooking and sweet grass, and when she listened closely, his heartbeat was a lullaby she could sleep to without nightmares. "I'm sorry."

It was a bad habit of hers to apologize for things that weren't her fault. Mike didn't know if he could ever get her to stop, but he knew he'd always assure her otherwise. "It's not your fault," he said, lifting her chin so they could be at eye level. "We're going to need to tell Hopper, eventually. Maybe he can figure out if there's someone there. There's still a chance it can be nothing."

He *hoped* it was nothing, with every fiber of his being. That laboratory was government property. Anyone messing with it was most likely *from the government*. The same people that used her as an experiment, then smeared her image with stories of how she was some kind of dangerous fugitive when she was the actual victim. They let people think Will was did, came into their homes, confiscated their belongings and then put bugs *everywhere*.

El couldn't come home because of them. She had to hide for *two fucking years*. Mike couldn't emphasize how much he hated those bastards.

"What do you think he'll take better, us moving in together or that something's going on at the lab?" she asked, actually trying to drop some form of humor into their predicament.

"Valid question. Answer probably depends on his opinion of me at the time of confession."

She was smiling again. It was small, but it was good enough for him.

They spent the next several minutes in silence. It wasn't uncomfortable, although they both knew they were ensnared by their own thoughts - Mike's fingers were in her curls, hers played with his shirt until the first button came undone.

"I want you to show me."

"What?"

"The light in the lab," he clarified, staring her straight in the eyes with the intent of not backing down. "I want you to show me. Tonight. I'll meet you outside your window."

El's eyebrows knitted together.

"Please?"

"You don't have to be polite about it," she retorted. Mike had to grin a little there. He could tell she was exasperated, but he was sure it was a *fond* exasperation. That's what he liked to think, anyway. "Fine. After midnight. Don't knock on the wi-"

A squeak came to interrupt her words as he flipped them, Mike on top of her all over again and his hands climbing up her sides with motive. "We've mastered the art of sneaking out at night without the Chief noticing." *I think*. "I know what to do."

It was well past sundown when he dropped her off. "After midnight," Mike reminded after their kisses goodbye, something they almost couldn't *stop* again but Hopper was at home, waiting, and she wanted to be mindful of time before suspicions arose. El didn't let him escort her to the porch much to his dismay, but they'd see each other in a couple hours at best.

He often made a point to linger around the path, car engine off, windows rolled down, as she disappeared into the woods in case he heard something strange or off. He hadn't, not in the years of her finally being home, but he tonight he was particularly anxious.

Tonight, and probably for the next several nights, that peace was threatened.

Jim Hopper always had a signature knock before entering the cabin.

Eleven didn't.

Her signature entrance was, of course, undoing the locks of the inside from the outside without breaking a sweat or bloody nose. When he heard steel clink against steel, chains coming undone, the Chief knew

it was unmistakably her and that she'd come home.

"Hey," was his gruff greet from the partitioned kitchen area. He was still in uniform with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, prepping something over the stove for the evening. Judging from the blue box on the counter, he was cooking up the scrumptious cuisine of macaroni and cheese. "Eaten yet?"

"No," El told him, dropping her backpack so she could undo her sneakers for the second time today. "Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler had a rough evening." *Again*. Mike hadn't wanted to stay home long when they came storming through the front door, their entrance spoiling their mood. He was off picking Holly up from her friend's, probably.

Hopper couldn't help but snort. "Jesus," he mumbled around his cigarette. "Figures. How'd school go?"

It was a question he didn't fear so much anymore. The *Don't Be Stupid* rules had been expanded on drastically when she was introduced to society, and before she'd been a snot about following them until she reunited with her friends. *Especially* the Wheeler boy. The older she got, the more she understood his reasons.

She didn't always like it - and there were times shit was thrown across the room during their disagreements - but she came to see his side a little more. And he saw hers, and then they'd sit on the couch and eat something detrimental to their cholesterol like nothing happened.

"Good," she answered with a shrug and went to get a soda from the fridge. "Max and Lucas are still fighting."

"How's that going for them?"

"Badly."

"About college crap still?"

The can of Pepsi (because Coke could conjured memories she cared to forget) was opened, and the carbonation hissed. "Yes."

"Relationships get complicated the older you get," Hopper said,

straining the pasta into the sink. Steam billowed, and he took a moment to enjoy a puff of his cancer stick. "Sometimes people want to move on and see what else the world offers. Puppy love doesn't cut it anymore."

Eleven knew the reasoning behind it. It was something Max struggled with, a *lot*, because she loved Lucas, but the distance and separation would take a toll. She was afraid of the future and afraid of limiting herself. El herself couldn't empathize much. She'd once asked Mike if he ever felt the way Max and Lucas did, and he looked at her like she sprouted eight heads.

It was relieving.

Then they had sex in his car, which was even more relieving.

He started mixing the melted cheese into the macaroni shells and she watched, leaning against the off-white fridge with her fingers tapping against her aluminum drink. El had things to say to him. Two, in fact, but she wouldn't dish it all out in one night.

Baby steps.

"Mike asked me to move in with him," she spoke quietly, like usual, though the words reached his ears and she saw him pause in the stirring. "I said yes."

El couldn't see his face to even try and decipher what the hell he was feeling *or* thinking. It had her anxious, though, and she bit her lip as wordless seconds passed along with every tick of the wall clock.

What she didn't know right away is that her words, initially, filled him with fear. *Fear*. Hopper didn't know if every parent felt this way when their child suddenly announced they'd be leaving the nest, but that's where he knew this was going - because she wasn't a *child* anymore. She knew what words like *compromise* meant, and she was literate, close to getting her goddamn driver's license (that had internally wrecked him a bit), and there were only a few short months left before she graduated from the awkward horrors of high school, becoming a full-fledged legal *adult*.

He didn't trust the world. It was sick. Ruthless. It wasn't kind to anyone. It sure as fuck hadn't been kind to *her* from the start, and sharing a home - becoming her *father* - made him feel like he could keep the outside world from hurting her again.

But he had strived to make sure she lived the most normal life she could within these walls. Moving on after high school was *normal*; just another phase of life that naturally came, and while his knee-jerk reaction was something along the lines of *you can't leave*, he knew that wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be right.

She heard him breathe in deep. He washed his hands at the sink, smothered his cigarette into the ashtray on the windowsill, and slowly turned to face her.

Midst the scruff of his beard was the tiniest, saddest smile. El felt her heart ache.

"Indianapolis?"

Her head nodded once.

Hopper exhaled a sigh, thinking it over. "Not too far. He's not doing a dorm?"

"An apartment," she said, quiet still.

"Still no college for you?"

"I don't want to throw money at classes if I don't know what I want to study."

"That's smart," commended the Chief. He didn't want her to feel pressured about finding some bullshit career. All he wanted her was to be *happy*. Wherever the hell that took her in life.

"You're not..." she nibbled the inside of her cheek, "going to give me some kind of lecture about puppy love and limiting myself?"

"Do you *want* me to?"

"No."

"Good, because it doesn't really apply to you."

"What do you mean?"

He started filling two bowls of the cheesy pasta for them. Tomorrow he'd do something with vegetables to make sure she got her *greens* (because she was fucking impossible with eating healthy), but tonight this would do. "You. Wheeler. Sometimes that shit *does* work out. People that meet when they're kids and stay together for the rest of their lives. Not common, but it ain't impossible. Had a feeling that's how it'd turn out for the two of you punks for the longest time. Come on, take a seat."

Their table only fit two people still. Any larger gatherings usually happened elsewhere, like Joyce's. A couple times at the Wheeler's when they felt like faking their marriage in front of people.

Hopper dropped to his chair, and it wasn't the curly-haired little person that sat across from him anymore. Instead it was an almost-woman, petite in size with wavy brown locks and a fondness of dark clothes and leather. An almost-woman who devoured books at night, who made sure to let people know her quiet nature wasn't due to shyness (she was picky with her company, much like he was, and heaven help someone who tried to bully her), who would do anything for the tight-knit group of friends she did have.

She was stubborn, loyal, and often unforgivably blunt. He couldn't be more proud.

"Kid's always been a huge pain in my ass with his *heart eyes*," he groused on. "He never stopped looking at you like you made the world spin on its axis, not once. Don't think he'll stop, either. So if you two are going to get more serious than you already are, I gotta be glad you're with someone who gave me a bruised rib when he was thirteen because he was pissed that I'd hid you from him for an entire year."

Eleven laughed. She laughed so much she couldn't even safely sip her soda, and her smile must have been miles wide. "I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said about him, Pops."

Pops.

That title had been a slip from when she referred to him as *Hops*, and it was perfect.

"Yeah, yeah," he huffed, stabbing several noodles onto his fork. Him and Mike's relationship had been tense at first; there was a part of the kid that couldn't *forget* all the days of wondering whether Eleven was dead or alive. Jim couldn't blame him. Over time, Mike chose to treat him with stoic civility instead of fear. And sometimes, they even smiled at each other. "Just – do me a favor. Don't take it too fast, alright? Enjoy one another before shit gets even *more* serious."

"Promise," El assured him, happy. So happy that she almost, in fact, forgot about the other detail waiting in the dark. She didn't want to ruin this.

So she'd tell him later.

He was asleep by 10:34pm. By 11:53pm, she knew Mike was already waiting outside her window. Figures he'd interpret *after midnight* to be seven minutes before actual midnight.

Their eyes met in the night, one leg dangling out the window while the other was still in her bedroom. She moved with caution, careful not to make the bones of the cabin creek and crack - last thing they wanted was their plan to go tits up due to the awakening of her father figure.

Mike noticed she wore a pair of sweatpants he'd outgrown ages ago. It fit her like glove.

They said nothing to one another this close to home, not even in whispers. She slowly shut the window with what seemed like only a spare glance, and Mike knew he'd never stop being at awe at her literal mental prowess, whether they did something entirely mundane or fantastical (like, oh, opening and closing inter-dimensional gates, *no big deal*).

It wasn't until some distance was between them and the cabin that

they said anything. Mike had a flashlight out, and she made a noise of protest because *that* was a beacon of obvious. "I can't see," he defended himself.

"Your eyes will adjust," was her protest. Eleven was used to wandering around in literal pitch blackness, and she was also well-versed in maneuvering through the woods (weirdly better than he was, really, and he hated to think it was because she had *lived* in them for several weeks). Her hand reached for his free one and their fingers locked, like metals fused stubbornly together. "I told Hops, by the way. About us moving in together."

Mike stumbled over his very own feet and if it weren't for his girlfriend's grip, his face would have ungracefully met the ground.

"And he's given his blessing," El continued, hoping to prevent anymore potential moments of clumsiness. She chuckled, huskily, and brought his hand to her lips. "He likes you."

"I guess the feeling's mostly mutual," he said after processing, relieved that it didn't escalate to anything needlessly complicated. Mike didn't doubt the Chief was going to pull him aside and have a serious *talk* with him, as he was anal retentive about Eleven's safety. That was fine. It was at least something they could agree on. "I'll tell my parents then. Soon. And we'll take a trip, just us, to scout some places?"

Both of them smiled, their eyes now adjusted enough with the night to see it in one another.

The final trek was climbing up the steep hill, and it brought them up so high to a clearing and ledge that offered them a full view of the sea of trees. Hanging in the sky was the moon, full and bright, shining down. It let them see the building in the dead center, menacingly tall, and Mike was hit with an unpleasant wave of nostalgia.

It had been a long time since he'd seen the silhouette of the laboratory - a monster in its own right, looming and immortal.

"There," she pointed, giving his eyes the direction needed to notice

what they were here to observe. It wasn't the most glaringly obvious detail but when he finally *noticed* it, it was the only thing he could see.

A light. Dim, like she said, something not at all visible during the day. At night, it was a different story.

Mike unzipped his backpack to switch out the flashlight for a pair of binoculars to take a closer look, but there wasn't much for him to make out. Shadows, mostly, and the faint glow from that lone window was nothing more than a blur. He didn't *think* the building was as heavily guarded as it'd once been - as in, no armed-to-the-teeth military personnel patrolling on foot - so it had him somewhat hopeful.

While he gawked and tried to piece theories together, she sat on a fallen log and slipped a single cigarette from her pocket.

"None of the outside lights are on," he observed, squinting through the lenses. "Just *that* one." *Why?* Who the hell had managed to get even the power back up and running in that goddamn hellhole? Was there a separate generator? "And you said you saw this place in that place, that void, right? There's *got* to be someone in - *EL*."

"Hm?"

"What the hell are you doing?"

He had finally noticed her casually light a cigarette without shame.

"Stressing out," she answered plainly, crossing her legs.

"So you're smoking," Mike deadpanned.

"That's what everyone usually does. It helps a little." Especially when it came to suppressing leaks of telekinesis from her feelings.

His look was enough to know that he didn't *like* it. No need for words there. El could tell he was a little upset, but then the slouch of his shoulders signified some sense of defeat. He lowered his binoculars and then joined her on the log, eyes ahead at the building.

"You do this most nights, then? Come up here? Watch to see if something happens?"

"Yes."

Ashes were flicked off the end of the cigarette, and the embers softly burned away the white paper as she took another puff. Mike watched her do it, noting how *natural* it looked for her - with her hardened face (no dimples to be seen), the remnants of black liner around caramel eyes. Unsurprisingly, she intimidated a lot of people at school with her few words and a face that said *fuck off*.

Over the years, the bullies left them alone. The reason was obvious.

But she wasn't the least bit terrifying to him, and he knew it was *her* that was scared. Scared about what this could mean for them, scared that everything she did her best to avoid in the past couple years could effortlessly come back and mess all their plans up. They were so, so close in getting out of here. They could almost taste air that didn't surround Hawkins.

Mike pulled the cigarette from her mouth in mid-smoke, and put it between his own lips for a single intake that burned his throat and stung his lungs more than he was prepared for. Then, he tossed it to the ground and smothered it under his shoe.

When he kissed her, their mouths tasted like warm ash.

Like he said earlier that day, they'd figure it out. Together.

3. Little Spoon

"That look, Hop," Joyce tsked, fingers hugging the disposable cup like it was life. "Your *eyebrows* are even frowning. What's wrong?"

There was a disarray of papers on his desk ignored for the sake of present company and an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth. Florence knew to not open the door unless it was urgent; this was when he gathered his thoughts, readied himself and set the tone for the rest of the day. Joyce had, eventually, become a pleasant visitor that came by some days, hands occupied with cups of the most robust coffee in town and pastries (not of the donut variety, it was too cliché). Things to contemplate over with.

Together.

Jim Hopper grew fonder of mornings because of it.

"El just dumped some news on me last night," he answered gruffly. "About her and Mike."

Her eyebrows literally skyrocketed. "She's not – they're not –"

It took only a few seconds for him to figure out the insane conclusion she jumped to. "Jesus Christ, Joyce, *no*. There'd be a lot more yelling and shit thrown out the window if – just, fuck. They're moving in together and for reasons completely unrelated to the crap you're thinking. She wants to follow him to Indianapolis while he does the college thing."

Joyce's body literally deflated with relief. "Oh," she sighed. "Good, good. Sorry. You just sounded so ominous, and..." *Never mind*. "You're worried."

"Bingo," he said, less alarmed and more defeated than anything.

"You know that's a normal reaction to have when a child leaves the nest," she assured him, the softest of smiles on her lips. Fatherhood was such an endearing look on the man across from her, but she knew his concerns ran deeper than what any normal father would

feel. "I was so stressed about Jonathan leaving home that I broke out in hives and there is not enough wrinkle cream in the world that'll stop worrying from aging me when Will moves into his dorm. I'm *at* least prepared for the hives this time around."

Hopper couldn't help but smile too, even if it was barely a twitch of his mouth. Finally, he lit the cigarette. "Of course you are."

"What did you tell her?"

"I was supportive," he admitted slowly, taking the first puff before passing it to her. Hopper had *always* been supportive. He wasn't blind to El's desperation when he kept her hidden, he wasn't blind to their dumb young-and-in-love faces when they reunited, and he sure as hell wasn't blind, numb *or* deaf when Mike had a complete meltdown in his arms. He set boundaries after all that – reasonable ones, he would argue – but never dreamt of keeping them apart longer than necessary.

El would have to find a job out there with the little bit of experience she had doing administrative duties at the station. Mike, too, on top of a grueling school schedule. No way in hell could they handle shit on *one paycheck*. It wouldn't be a honeymoon for them, and Hopper worried about the practical things that came with two fresh-outta-high school brats venturing out on their own.

But, grimly, he took comfort in knowing the girl that became his daughter survived wintry months on her own. That she, on a stupid stunt, ventured off to *fucking Chicago* with the clothes on her back and whatever the hell was in her pockets (he'd also prefer to forget the man and the truck thing, for the health of his heart). Mike was crafty, too, and he knew they'd take care of each other.

They always did. It made his teeth rot with how annoyingly *sweet* it was.

"Don't think she'd even listen to me if I'd gotten difficult about it anyway, and she's...done better than I thought she would," he tacked on. "Growing up. Adapting."

"You did a good job helping her adapt, too," Joyce exhaled smoke.

"That's your baby. You love her. It's okay to be proud and worried sick and happy for her all at once. She'll always have you, and you'll always have her. All this is just the sad truth about being a parent to someone – they grow up."

He huffed. "Too fast."

"Too fast," she chuckled, passing the cigarette back.

But that was normal, and it was all he'd ever wanted this second chance of a daughter to be. Normal. Her version of it.

They sat in minutes of comfortable silence, taking drags of what was going to surely give them lung cancer and sipping their caffeinated beverages. It was warm outside, the sun beaming through the window blinds, bathing Joyce in gold light.

Might as well do it now.

"I was thinking," Hopper cleared his throat, "with the kids being not kids anymore and ditching us old people, if maybe we you'd want to think of, ah, moving –"

He hadn't expected the door to fly open. Florence's timing was outrageous and he would have glared at her if hadn't been for the urgency in her eyes.

Joyce swiveled in the chair to face her, and Jim's brows did that thing they were doing earlier – frowning. "What's the matter, Flo?"

"It's the feds," she replied. Behind her were suited men, and the world around him came to a screeching halt. "They're here."

Mike didn't know what to think.

"You're sure about this?" was his question after a careful deliberation of the sketchbook. The pages held images he hadn't seen in a *long* time; charcoal lines that shaped a sinewy silhouette with a face split into hellish flower petals, and he could almost hear the screeching transcend paper.

Not the best memory to have, honestly.

Lunch period had finally arrived, and the senior courtyard flourished during spring afternoons. There was a spot on the grass he secured for himself and everyone, and it hadn't taken long for company to trickle in. First, El; with her rock star shades and loose curls, hugging her backpack in front of her like a teddy bear. Their lips met effortlessly, easy like breathing, and words about last night didn't need to be said.

Will the Wise was second. Mike knew there was something up when El had reached over to tug on his arm. Theirs was an easy closeness, too – El didn't look at him like he was precious breakable china, and understood his need for space and silence more than most. Will was the same way.

Today was the day Mike learned about Will's future university project.

"We'll obviously change things up," he assured him. "You know, just to be careful? But the same themes remain, like other dimensions and government conspiracies. And you're good with telling stories, and I thought you and El could offer some – I don't know – creative direction?"

That made an eyebrow rise. "El?"

"Reference," she clarified, unwrapping the pathetic excuse of a sandwich she had packed for herself. "Powers. Monsters. Government stuff."

In all his facially expressive glory, the look he had offered her couldn't be interpreted as anything but an exasperated *really?*

Eleven could see where it was all in poor taste, in the scheme of things.

He needs this, was her wordless reply. Somehow, he seemed to understand and after mulling it over, Mike surrendered.

"Okay."

Will smiled. It wasn't as if he didn't understand Mike's reluctance, either – even he had his own reservations – but he felt confident about this. Like he could make it into something good. He wouldn't push forward if it bothered them. They were part of the story too, and he'd start bringing it up with the others later. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's a cool idea, Will. *Really* cool." Mike smiled back, returning the sketchbook. "I'll help, and El and I won't be far from you anyway." He knew this was some kind of coping mechanism for his friend, and that was fine. There was no way to forget or undo what they had all seen, and all the shit they had survived. *All* of them had changed because of it.

Some became stronger, and some – or maybe just Mike – had become a little more jaded.

Then came Maxine, her presence like a meteor crashing, and she had a tray of cafeteria fixings with a soda that didn't miraculously topple over when she flopped next to El. "Boom, bitches. Don't worry – Stalker and Dustin aren't far behind me and, yeah, we're talking today."

"Finally," Eleven snorted, abandoning her sandwich to swipe fries from Max's plate that generated quiet banter along the lines of *seriously, El and I'll trade you my sandwich*, followed with *that looks like wet cardboard*.

Things got more talkative when their circle was complete, all six of them. Lucas and Max actually sat next to each other, elbow to elbow. Dustin was, of course, the loudest, and shushed the party members for a minute. "Guys, *guys*. It's important for us to, literally, be up one another's asses as much as we possibly *can* for the next several weeks, alright?"

El was in mid-bite of a stolen fry when she heard that, and Mike was an angel sent above to always clarify things. "No, no, he didn't actually mean *literally*. He's just trying to over exaggerate his metaphor."

"I know what I said!" Dustin announced (but also not really knowing what he said), pushing his finger against his lunch tray like he was

making a point. "We don't know when's the next time we'll all be together after graduation, not really – so let's start. Let's make more plans. What's everyone doing this weekend? Saturday night, I propose the junkyard."

"So we can get tetanus?" Lucas snorted.

"They make shots for that, asshole. Anyway, we can have a fire pit? Makeshift some chairs around it? There's a ton of old seats in the busses we can pull out, and I can get Steve to get us shitty beer and we can just hang! And reminisce about almost getting killed by interdimensional beings because I'm pretty sure that's only a Hawkins thing."

"I've got a shift at The Hawk Saturday, and El's visiting her mom this weekend," Mike said, genuinely disappointed. "Unless –"

"Friday?" Dustin finished for him, looking hopeful.

Will raised a hand. "Friday night. *In*."

"We're in," Max announced, raising her hand with a somewhat enthused Lucas. "Daddy Chief won't bust us, right?"

"As long as we don't get too stupid," Eleven shrugged.

"Dustin," Mike warned.

Lucas chimed in on that too. "*Dustin*."

"Dudes," breathed the accused, his hand on his chest like a vulnerable maiden about to faint. "*Rude*. The both of you. I'm only here to propose all of us having a good time together and, personally, I'm feeling very attacked right now."

"He's right, though," Will contributed, waving a hand. "About us needing to take advantage of how easy it is for us to meet up like this. Because soon, it won't be. There's holidays and stuff, sure, but..."

Dustin nodded resolutely. "So, all of us. Once a week. *Outside* of school." Which seemed reasonable enough, he thought – there were things to study for, part-time jobs to go to, extracurricular activities

to finish up. Their outings together so far had been spread apart, and sometimes with only partial attendance. They needed to consciously commit. "Whether it's the junkyard, or Mike's basement, or the arcade. Don't give a shit where. It just needs to have us. *All of us.*"

"What, do you want us to pinky-promise? A blood pact?"

"Can we not provoke him to any of that," Lucas deadpanned at Max, then smirked. "But, yeah. I'm game."

Mike juttet a finger towards the two of them. "Whether or not you two are on speaking terms, alright? *No divide.*"

"Uh, right back at the two of you," Lucas pointed too.

"We definitely don't *fight* as much as—"

Max's head fell onto Eleven's lap. "Ohhhh my goddddddddddd."

"Stoppppppppp," El groaned, falling back onto the grass.

"Should we date each other instead? Because I vote we switch partners. Seriously. I have freckles. I can be Mike. I'll feed you waffles and wipe your nose when it gets bloody."

"Will you be my little spoon too?"

"Mike's the *little spoon*?" gasped the redhead.

Dustin pondered that for a second and shrugged. "Makes sense."

"I'm *not* spooning Mike in this deranged swap!"

"I want you to *not* spoon me even more, Lucas, trust me."

Will snickered. "I like how he neither confirms *nor* denies being the little spoon."

"He likes to be lovingly held in the powerful telekinetic arms of his belooooooved," Max sang, right before making gagging noises and rolling off of the other girl's lap.

Mike was thankful he'd gotten used to the incessant teasing over the

years; back then he blushed, stammered and scowled, still trying to maneuver through adolescent awkwardness with an equally socially awkward girlfriend who didn't understand what innuendos even *were*. Now that he was older and arguably wiser, he rolled his eyes and flipped the bird.

Like now.

(Later, in his own belated defense, Mike would grumble, "*It's an evenly split fifty-fifty spooning deal, anyway.*")

Before classes ended, *Jane Hopper* was called to the front office.

A million times better than the principal's office, really. Her first year fully exposed to the Hawkins Public School System landed her there several times. Hopper made the mistake of advising her to use her words first, fists second, and powers *never* unless it involved a life or death situation.

Verbal communication was important to society, no shit.

He'd taught her some basic self-defense to fall back on, should something ever happen. It seemed reasonable, given everything.

And no one *needed* to know she had 'superpowers' (what the boys insisted on calling it). Obviously.

Except El had bumped 'fists' to first and 'words' to second, and the Chief of Police realized that it was shitty advice to give to someone who had to be taught to string together basic sentences at the age of twelve and was still figuring words out at age fourteen. He was pleased to know she had refrained in making a complete telekinetic shit show, but the social hierarchy of high school seemed to have somehow gotten more vicious as the years passed – and, well.

Parenthood was all about trial and error. That entire year had definitely been *trial and error* (more error than anything), and as it turns out anyone with the last name Hopper didn't take crap from anyone. Or let anyone give her *friends* crap. No one questioned the (technically non-existent) legitimacy of her kinship to Jim Hopper

after similarities became apparent. Eventually, El simmered down. She angry-cried a lot less and got into a routine she came to reluctantly accept with the god-sent patience of her friends.

Later on, they realized his advice wasn't as shitty as they thought. She did her best to make sure words were first, fists were second, and powers only under certain circumstances. It usually kept her out of trouble, and by then the bullies were too taken aback to mess with her and the mean girls realized bruises weren't a good look for them.

(Snickers and rumors spread later, where some cliques nominated her for the Year Book's unofficial 'Most Likely to Murder Someone' category. Mike was *angry*.)

"Hop?" she said, twirling her fingers around the curly phone chord. There weren't any detentions that needed hashing out at the front office; she was summoned to have a personal message relayed at the insistence of the police chief. "What's wrong?"

"Stop worrying so much." There was a pause, then the sound of his breath. He was smoking. "Just wanted to tell you Callahan's sick and I gotta pull an all-night stakeout. Won't be back until tomorrow morning."

The news wasn't all that unusual. It came with the territory of the job, and in the past he had made sure to call personally to let her know.

"Why don't you, ah – stay at a friend's tonight?"

El shrugged. "Okay, I guess."

"Take money from my swear jar for food if you have to," he said. "And for the love of god, try to eat something *green* this week."

"No promises."

Snort. "Figures."

"Be careful?"

He hesitated. Hop never did at her request.

"I will."

"Love you," she whispered. They didn't say it as much as they should. El realized she really, really wanted to fix that.

At least she could hear the smile at the other end. Little did she know that he had come to the same conclusion. "Love you too, kid. See you tomorrow. Don't –"

"- be stupid," she finished for him.

Outside of the office door, Mike waited. He was statuesque at this age – tall, lean, sharp cheekbones and pale skin that was a stark contrast with all that was *dark* about him. His hair, his eyes, the prominent brows. Some said puberty finally blessed him, but he never outgrew the interests that labeled him a 'hardcore nerd' and he never really outgrew the habit of striped shirts during the warmer days and not-so-fashionable sweaters when the temperature dropped.

Spectators looking in always did wonder what the fuck would make someone like *him* attach himself to the hip to someone like –

"Hop's working overnight," El told him when she emerged, tucking strands of hair behind her ears. As she had grown it out, the tips became golden – like they were dipped in warm honey.

"Everything okay?"

"As far as I know. I can stay at someone's house tonight, though." The light in Mike's eyes was snuffed out as soon as it was lit, and she made a sweet pouty face at him. "But you need to talk to your parents, and I don't think I should be there for it."

And it was probably true. Hopper barely offered resistance to their plans according to El – Hop probably surrendered to the fact they'd do whatever the fuck they wanted anyway, despite his opinions – but his parents were a different story. Nancy liked El. Holly *really* liked El. His parents never gave an inclination that they didn't, but Ted Wheeler never expected someone like El to be his son's type, and sometimes his mother acted a little weird around her. Not rude, or cold, but...*weird*. Whether or not they realized the relationship would

extend well beyond graduation was something he'd find out.

Mike did say he'd tell them soon, and he guessed tonight was soon enough. He let out a tortured sigh, tightening an arm around her shoulders as he led them away from the office. "Yeah, yeah, you're right. I need to get it over with. Rip it like a band aid and give them time to get used to the idea."

"Then we'll tell Hop about the...other thing."

They were by her locker now. She spun the dial for her combination.

"Did you get sleep last night?"

"Sort of." Nightmares never got her weepy, just restless and anxious – and she had more than just a bad dream to be restless and anxious about. Part of her was still convinced there was something wrong with her head. "You?"

"Sort of," Mike parroted, truthfully.

When she was free from holding textbooks, she let her fingers ticklishly spider-walk along his sides and stood on her toes to reach for a kiss. He met her halfway; his hand curling at the base of her neck and their noses rubbed together and they both smiled, like idiots, against each other's mouth.

"Guessing maybe twisting Hopper's suggestion and me keeping you company at the cabin tonight's out of the question?"

He looked so *hopeful*. It physically ached to tell him no, and he whined like a baby in protest and hugged her waist.

"I'll ask Max if she wants to kidnap me tonight, and if she *doesn't*," El compromised. "Then maybe. Probably. Yes."

As it turned out, Max *did* want to kidnap her that night, and she wouldn't take the sacrifice of Mike's eternal slavery as a trade. She insisted that they needed some one-on-one girl time without a wall of testosterone surrounding them, and she probably still needed to talk about *things* and a certain *boy* so, faithfully, El couldn't deny the only other female of the party.

"I'm kinda scared to even ask what the hell is it that you two *do* during a sleepover," Lucas said when they were all out in the parking lot. He and Mike were bidding farewell to the ladies outside of Max's orange mustang.

As usual, that mustang's owner met him with dripping sarcasm. "Oh, let's see. We hang around in our bra and panties, do our nails, have a pillow fight and then, hm, eat pudding off each other?"

Dustin caught some of that as he walked up. "Uh?"

"Yep," Will nodded sagely. "Walked in on this conversation at the wrong time."

Despite the snark, she and Lucas kissed each other goodbye. El saw that as a good thing.

"I'll probably get a bite with the guys before I drop Will off home," Mike whispered, leaning against the window frame of the car. Eleven was already inside. Max started the engine, and was kindly waiting for them to say their schmoopy goodbyes for the day before speeding off. "I'll call you later tonight?"

"Mmhm," she smiled and pulled him through the window for one more smooch. "Good luck."

"You done, Little Spoon?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Har, har."

After their first stop at El's to gather basic utilities (clothes, toothbrush, cash from the swear jar), the next destination was downtown. The plans were to drop her mustang off for an oil change, while the grease monkeys worked they'd get some milkshakes and button mash at the arcade until sundown. Maxine had been observant, though, eventually asking what Little Spoon – her newest, greatest nickname for Michael Wheeler – needed luck for.

She wasn't all that surprised when she learned the reason. "Oh," blinked the redhead, passing the pack of gum she'd pulled from the console earlier. "Cool."

"Lucas?"

"What about him?"

"You two seem better."

"Kinda," Max admitted, and once they arrived at the mechanic's garage. It was a skip and hop away from their entertainment, and she exited the vehicle with her key ring spinning around her fingers. "We're revisiting the subject when graduation gets closer and seeing how we're feeling about – *what the fuck*."

"You can have feelings about 'what the fuck'...?" was what El muttered, mostly to herself, not sure if she was even understanding what she'd *meant*. Sugary gum being slipped into her mouth, she followed her friend's perplexed stare. It came to land on what she was *what the fucking* about.

'Til this day, Billy Hargrove never buttoned his shirt all the way. He had never left Hawkins, either, despite having a final blowout with their parents and declaring how much he hated this place, and everyone, and everything, and stormed out of the house for good.

Sometimes they'd hear about what crowds he hung out with. It wasn't often.

Max knew he lived in the area with a roommate.

But she rarely saw him or spoke to him.

Not without reason. El heard some things (especially with what happened with Lucas), and her dislike of him was automatic. So when she saw him, his recent haircut freeing him from the in-style mullet look, with sleeves rolled up to his elbows, tools in his hands and dark smudges smeared all over him, she narrowed her eyes and slowly chewed her strawberry bubblegum.

Even surprised, there was something so smug about him. "If it ain't the baby sis," he grinned. "Nice ride."

"You work here," Max deduced. When she got nervous her foot had a habit of tapping – El noticed the beginnings of it, but she was proud

to see how her shoulders squared. "Whatever. I need an oil change, and can I trust you to not do something douchey like cut my brake lines?"

Billy wiped his hands with a rag, taking slow steps towards them. Max wasn't a *wee thing* anymore, and was reputedly fierce with a temper that matched her volcanic hair color. But her stepbrother could get under her skin still, and there were a lot of unresolved issues between the two that festered. Billy hated Lucas, made Steve's face different shades of blue and purple, and he used to grab Max so *tight* that bruises would trail. All El knew was that she'd flung people across the room with a flick of her head for less.

"Sure. I might be an ass but I'm not into the murder scene," he snarked. He was behaving, probably because he was at his place of employment and mouthing off aggressively at a paying customer could get him canned. The car door slammed shut, and his eyes went from one girl to the other. "Aren't you Nancy Jr's Girlfriend?"

El cocked her head to the side. She blew a bubble with her gum, slowly, and then it popped.

She said nothing.

He'd never admit how unsettling her stare was.

"She's the Chief's daughter, Billy. Take my keys, do your job, and I'll be back in like, an hour to pick up and pay up. Thanks, *bye*."

Max took her by the hand to tug her along, and El thought it a miracle that she could keep up with her hurried stomping. "Dipshit."

"Dipshit," the Zoomer agreed, grouchy.

"Why is he still around?"

"Honestly? Fuck if I know." Once the view of the arcade neared, she eased with a sigh. "I hear things sometimes, like he's sticking around for a girl? Then I hear he's some bored housewife's sidepiece. I don't care enough to figure it out. I just want a milkshake and Donkey Kong, and then we'll do the responsible thing of going to my place and doing homework like nerds. Okay?"

El looked over her shoulder. Billy was still watching them, and she wondered why he didn't just recognize her as the Chief's daughter.

Everyone else always did.

As the night progressed, and the detail pulled at the edges of her mind, she finally settled on the realization that his words were offensively specific. That bothered her.

4. Another Nancy Situation

Things at the Wheeler House had changed.

Nancy, for starters, was no longer a resident. Her presence would grace them during holidays and the occasional college breaks, but her bedroom was scarce of her most prized possessions and majority of her wardrobe. It seemed less bright without her in it. But her bed remained, and for all intents and purposes the room was still very much *hers* whenever she did stop by.

Sometimes with one Jonathan Byers, sometimes alone. He had his own family to see too, anyway.

(One that expanded due to his mother's love life, and he liked Hopper – and actually clicked really, *really* well with El. Mike hadn't expected that.)

Holly had grown, now obsessed with unicorns, and was actually *pretty annoying* but he loved her all the same - even if she talked a lot, sometimes (accidentally) ratted him out with all that said talking, and when he had his girlfriend visit he would somehow end up becoming the *third wheel* to them. It was cute. Still *pretty fucking annoying*, but at the end of the night he could appreciate the sight of his baby sister snuggled up against Eleven's side and snoring like a loud menace.

His *parents*, though.

It was past dinnertime, and he couldn't remember the last time staying out past dinner was a criminal offense in this house. His mother used to cook every single night, and every single night they would surround the dinner table to talk about, well, *whatever*. There were times it was nice. Other times he would scarf down the contents of his plate and excuse himself early to avoid certain conversations. Then Nancy left, and dinners around the table happened a little less.

But the fighting, at least, had been going on before the departure of the golden firstborn.

"I'm hoooooome," Mike called dully through the house. Garbled noise came from upstairs – Holly's giggling, probably on the phone with a friend – and he could see lights from the living room. No doubt his father deposited himself on the recliner (like every night) to watch television.

His mother emerged from at the top of the stairs, gussied up like she was going somewhere. "Michael! Did you eat yet? There's leftovers in the fridge," she offered, reaching over to swat some of that hair away from his eyes. *He needs a haircut*, Karen thought to herself. "I can heat them up for you? I'm about to leave soon. Book club meeting."

Despite dinners decreasing in frequency over the years, it didn't mean Karen Wheeler had grown negligent. Her children were *everything*. She still fussed and made sure they had something in their stomachs, and was always armed with disapproving stares when they did something *embarrassing*. Life as a housewife had given her cabin fever and caused a bit of an emotional eruption awhile back, and she was determined to go out and do things for herself. This book club (the books, he noticed, were trashy romance novels with bad art covers) was one of them.

And for some reason she always put on a little *too much* perfume when she attended those.

"Ate with the guys, so I'm fine," he dismissed. "Can I talk to you before you go? You and, uh, dad?"

Karen blinked. "Of course, honey – *TED!*"

"I'm not *deaf*, Karen."

Mike sighed.

"No, but you get sucked into that thing like you are," his mother irritably snapped, and then regretted it – she noticed her son's face. "I'm sorry. I just –"

"I'm not the one you should be saying sorry to," he mumbled, shedding the weight of his backpack to the ground and leading the way to the dining room.

Ted Wheeler was a lot of things. One, he was unobservant; it's not that he didn't *care*, and it was just an unfortunate flaw that he didn't seem to be able to pick up important details. Two, he harped on traditional values; men do the work, women take care of the home, and Nancy's plans of veering away from that made him visibly uncomfortable (he had voiced his disapproval, though not loudly). *Third*, he made comments about how the government 'took care of the people' due to his blind political ideals that drove Mike up the *wall*.

But despite all that, he wasn't the worst father. He didn't deserve that snide comment.

Mike took a seat and motioned his parents to do the same.

The Wheeler Patriarch adjusted his glasses. "Everything alright, son?"

"Uh, yeah," he blinked wide, figuring he needed to clarify the purpose of the conversation *soon*. Concern colored his mother's face. "Yeah, everything's totally fine. I just – you know with graduation coming up, and college?" His stomach did several somersaults and other gymnastic moves he hadn't a fucking clue about – but he reminded himself that he wasn't asking *permission*, either. "I wanted to give you guys a heads up, about Jane and I."

All those worry lines Karen had vanished. Glances were exchanged between her and Ted. "Okay...?"

"We're moving in together," Mike confessed with more confidence he thought he'd have. "She's coming to Indianapolis with me."

They looked at one another again. For the first time in awhile, they both seemed to agree on one thing – hesitance in voicing any support to the news, and he already knew what was going through their heads. *Another Nancy Situation*.

Mike refrained from prematurely rolling his eyes.

Karen was the first to speak. "Don't you think some..." the next words were carefully chosen, "some space would be a good idea? The city's not far, Michael, and you can always come home on the weekends,

holidays, between semesters? The first year's always so *difficult*, and we don't want you to be distracted –"

"Jane's not a distraction."

"Paying *rent* will be!" her voice raised, and Ted breathed a sigh. "Do you know how expensive it is to live out there? How hard it might be to find a job that will help get you to ends meet? Nancy's already gone through some difficult bumps, and –"

"Is she pregnant?"

Mike turned every shade of red imaginable in less than five seconds. "*What?* No! She's not – *we're not* – we're moving in together because we *want* to, dad, not because we *have* to."

That seemed to ease his father's concerns, although he still didn't look *enthralled* about the idea. He mumbled something about the youth these days; he didn't think his son was ready for something like marriage, but back in *his* day two people didn't shack up until there was a wedding ceremony.

"*Regardless*," Karen hissed, holding her hands up. "I get you two are very attached, and I know it might seem like being apart is the end of the world –"

Another interruption.

"You *never* gave Nancy this much shit, mom." His voice wasn't raised, no, but his narrowed eyes expressed the anger he felt – and hurt, too. "What's the problem? Do you not like Jane?"

(*Jane*, because that was what she was to everyone else. It was a beautiful name; he didn't actually *know* anyone else called that come to think of it, and if she had wanted to go by that name to everyone, then he would have obliged. But to him, she always wanted to be just *El.*)

"Maybe if everyone *stops interrupting me*," his mother's voice quivered, and Mike honestly had no goddamn clue where her aggression was *coming* from. He didn't think telling them would be *this* difficult. "I can actually explain myself. Because no, I don't *dislike* Jane. She's a

bit –" *What's the nicest way to put it?* "On the *strange* side, yes, but she's sweet, and helps me a lot more with the dishes around this house than anyone else that *lives here*, by the way."

"Then *tell me* what the issue is!"

Ted Wheeler felt like he was missing some kind of important information with the way his wife and son were locked in an intense tournament of *glaring* at one another.

"Ted," she swallowed. "Can you excuse us?"

"I don't understand why I should be excluded from his conversation, Karen. He's my son too. And he's not going to change his *mind*."

"What's everyone yelling about?" came a fourth voice, small and curious, and they all turned to see a pigtailed Holly peaking into the dining room.

Karen sucked in a sharp breath of air. "Ted," she repeated, motioning her head towards their youngest. "*Please*."

Shit shit shit. "Go ahead, dad," Mike assured his father, brown eyes *begging* him.

Ted was reluctant, but silently agreed. "Come on, sweetie – how about you and I go out for some ice cream? Would you like that?"

Holly beamed. Thankfully she was easy to please, and Karen waited until she heard the door close behind them to pick up where they left off.

This time, *she* cut Mike off before he got the chance to spit out a word.

"You weren't there the first time those federal agents came into the house," was what she started with, and his felt his heart sink into his stomach and was so, so glad his father wasn't in the *house* for this.

There was a fright in his eyes. *No, this can't -*

"Everything in this house was turned over because they were looking

for *you*. You and that *girl* you were hiding in our damn basement!"

He was quiet.

"And I'll never forget that day because you were acting so *odd*, and you just *left*, and I will never, *ever* forget when men in suits told me that my twelve year old son was in serious danger. You never wanted to talk about what happened, or *her*. I saw the girl's picture. I saw her face and her shaved head, and then after she disappeared you started acting out. Not just for a couple weeks, either, it was – what? An entire –"

Three hundred and fifty three days.

"Year, or more, I think." Karen stopped for a shaky gasp of air, her eyes glassy with the threat of tears. "And when I met Jane, I knew she looked familiar. I couldn't put my finger on it. Then she came around more, and you were acting so much better and I didn't want to think too much of it, but the truth is I never stopped wondering. Or *worrying*. And I need to know, Michael. I need to *know*."

You're not supposed to know.

There was a thick knot lodged in his throat. He didn't know how to get rid of it, and he hated it.

"What are you asking me?"

Don't ask me anything, please don't.

"Is she – her?"

Fuck. FUCK. Why now?

"That little girl – god, what was his name, I can't – he said –"

Brenner.

"He said she was dangerous. A Russian spy. That she was putting *you* in danger."

He lied. She saved me. More than once.

Mike ran his hand over his face, pushing his fingers into his hair because *fuck fuck fuck*.

"I don't understand how a little girl could have been dangerous and gotten so much *attention*, but if that's *her*, Michael – if Jane's her – then I need to know if that still puts *you* in any danger. I can't be okay with you two trying to do whatever it is you're even *doing* if she is."

"What the hell's that supposed to even *mean*?" His voice was loud, and scratchy, like he was trying to hold back a panicked cry. "Whatever it is we're doing? You act like you already have everything figured out so what do you *think* we're doing, mom? *I love her*. I've *been* in love with her. If you're not okay with it then that's *fine*, but that's not going to stop me from being with her!"

He hadn't explicitly said it the girl in the picture and Jane were one in the same, but Karen knew. She had *always* known, in a way, because she could never erase the picture from her mind – buzz cut, hospital gown, scared eyes, little face – and she saw that face *again*, albeit more matured, when Michael first introduced Jane to the family. Part of her hoped that whatever they had would fizzle and pop into nothing. That they'd be normal teenagers and fight about something ridiculous, and that they'd move on away from one another because that's what teenagers *did* when they started dating too young.

Except her son was in love.

He had said it.

Her heart ached because she believed him.

And Karen Wheeler was just terrified of what would become of him because of it.

"Stop *tapping your pencil*, El."

Night had fallen, the clock reflecting later hours, and they were in the privacy of Max's room. The walls were peach-colored (which she

hated but her mother insisted there be a splash of femininity among her daughter's rampant tomboyishness) with band posters plastered all around. There was a small tube television in the corner with a mesh of wires, a couple gaming consoles and their controllers tangled up – the Nintendo Entertainment System, Atari, Sega. Her new skateboard was propped up next to her *old* skateboard, and a random mess of things was strewn along the floor.

They had changed into their nightly wear (Max liked boxer shorts and tank tops, and El liked to wear anything oversized when she slept), both of them crammed on the twin-sized bed with paper and open textbooks. It was *nerd time*, but a certain *someone* couldn't focus and kept making noises with her writing instrument, blinking up at the supercom she'd gotten years ago as if giving it attention would bring it to life.

Max had gotten one too, a joint effort from all the boys as a way of *officially* initiating her into The Party. That was also when Little Spoon (gosh, she was just so darn *funny*) apologized for being a Grade A Dickwad.

Eleven sighed, dropping it. "Sorry."

"I accept your apology," she quipped, jotting more things down on paper, then went on, "I'm going to miss this, y'know. How easy it is to hang out. It sucks that it won't be like this soon. Man, do you remember when you *hated my guts*?"

"I didn't *hate* you."

"Uh-huh," Max grinned, looking up through her curtain of fiery hair. "First time you saw me? Almost gave me a concussion. Second time you snubbed me, *hard*. All I wanted was to be friends with this all-powerful telekinetic chick and you were being such a *mean girl*."

"I said sorry the third time," El rolled her eyes, grabbing one of the pillows – yes, she was arming herself, ready to smack her with it. "Why are you bringing this up again?"

There was a shrug. "It's just funny how things change. I thought I'd *hate* it here, and then I get initiated into a squad that helps fight off

monsters, and then you all grow on me like fungus. It's been a good few years, you know? I probably won't tell the *guys* this, but I'm just – happy. That I met you weirdos. I don't think I could ever have a closer group of friends, and not just because I pretty much hate most people."

"You make it sound like we won't be friends anymore," she pouted, and although she knew that wasn't Max's *intention*, she still couldn't help the pitiful doe-eyed look that was known to be a lethal weapon against her boyfriend.

"We'll always all each other, and we'll *visit*," the redhead assured, playfully punching El's shoulder. "And Lucas and I promised we wouldn't let things get weird between all of us in case shit doesn't work out, y'know? I know we've kind of been –"

"Crazy," the brunette helped.

"I *do* love him."

"I know."

"I just –"

"I know, Max."

El knew all of it. Fear. Insecurity. Seeing what had happened with her mother – and what was *still happening*, all because she jumped the gun right after high school, married young, and kept getting involved with men that were fucking awful. Maxine needed more time to figure things out for herself. California was going to be her next destination for a little bit, and then she'd stew and eventually have the bare bones of a plan. She wasn't ready to just follow Lucas to the east coast with abandon, and she'd been a bit upset (okay, lie; she was actually a lot upset) that it's what he *assumed* would happen.

(Not that she looked down at El for doing exactly *that* with Mike, and everyone was unique with their own dumb relationship shit to deal with anyway. What worked for them didn't work for her and Lucas, and vice versa.)

Finally, the books were cleared away and the blankets were kicked

up. Their sleepover routines usually involved sharing the bed (since they were fifteen, when they were finally comfortable around one another) and quietly chatting until the first one passed out. But Max noticed the continuous anxious chew of El's lip and if she continued, she'd break skin.

"Dude, just call him if you're so worried. You're not going to get any sleep because of it."

"No," El huffed, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her palm. "No, I shouldn't. If he hasn't called then it's because he's still talking to them, and they're probably making him mad." Otherwise he'd be on the other end of the device by now, ecstatic. "He'll want space."

That night, Max was right. She *didn't* get much sleep because of it, but to be fair, it was only one of many reasons.

Darkness. It stretched infinitely, all-consuming, absent of heat.

I hate it when this happens.

For now, she was alone.

I must be asleep. Finally.

It happened involuntarily sometimes, a slip of her mind from the realm of her subconscious to what lied in between everything that was upside-down and right side-up. Sometimes she could barely control *what* she found when it happened like this, because she could see things from both sides of the exact coin – the people, the *monsters*, the shadow.

None of them knew she was there, watching, like a ghost lost.

She spun once, and in the distance, she saw the brightness of a person. *Mike*. Awake, sitting upright in his bed, and she caught a glimpse of bleary red eyes like he was *crying*. When she tried to get to him, he went up in smoke.

"Mike!" she yelled into the void, hoping *something* would reach him.

There was silence. *Nothingness.*

"Why is my head *like this*," Eleven let out a frustrated whimper and covered her face. It was happening so *often*, and cemented the paranoia of something in her brain being off and broken. She willed herself to wake, but she heard a noise that caused her to look up.

Pops.

Hopper was in his truck, and he had hit the dashboard with fury, and his mouth opened to yell but just like Mike –

He went up in smoke too.

She breathed in, deep.

"It'll be over soon," she whispered to herself.

These episodes never lasted *too* long.

A shiver went up her spine, and she could have sworn there was a breath of a whisper in her ear – *turn around.*

Mama?

When she *did* turn, she saw a white door. Not just *any* door, either. It was different. Specific to the laboratory. Familiar. She had seen dozens of them in her childhood. There was a small window inches thick that would let her peek inside.

In there was a light.

In there was *someone.*

5. Pretend A Little Longer

It was barely dawn when her eyes snapped open in panic, mouth parted to unleash a silent cry, and a faint scent of something all too morbidly familiar invading her senses.

Blood.

Eleven swiped a thumb under her nose to check. There was no evidence of a red mess. Nosebleeds weren't *as* common anymore, thankfully – she had polished some of her skills, a practice Hopper had warily encouraged to decrease incidents when her stress levels peaked – but she could still *smell* the threat of it from time to time. A reminder that she was still human, and inhuman powers could take its toll.

Beside her, slumbering like she was dead to the world, was a sprawled and softly breathing Max, completely unaware of her friend's current predicament (which was *scared out of her fucking mind* and on the precipice of an anxiety attack, although El did her best to bite her tongue and level her breathing). On the nightstand the clock glowed with the numbers 6-2-2. There was still time before the alarm blared, but she didn't use it to try and capture the last bits of sleep.

Lucky her, she was never one to need much of it to function anyway.

El was careful with the way she scooted to the end of the bed, climbing out, and quietly stepping across the room to gather a bundle of her things – a change of clothes, bathroom tools – before exiting through the door. Television garble was at a low volume emitting from the kitchen, and she knew it was signaling the presence of Max's mother. Her stepfather, a functional alcoholic, always seemed to be gone before sunrise.

He was less likable than his own son. What a record to break.

She entered the bathroom. One nod flipped the switch and turned on the lights. The second closed the door behind her, and the lock slipped into place for secured privacy. Her belongings were set aside so she could grip the sides of the sink instead, facing her reflection in

the mirror.

Puffy, bleary eyes. Crease marks on her face from the pillow. Eleven was sure she looked just like the hell she felt.

Don't think about the light, don't think about the door, she thought to herself, the memory of it enough to make her shudder as if winter air nipped her back. She hadn't opened it, *couldn't* open it, didn't even want to think about *who* was in that room and what they –

And just like that, the lights buzzed, flickered, and then brightened with an abnormal surge of power.

turn around turn around turn around

"Don't," El hissed to no one but herself, taking steadying breaths before the bulbs burst and an excuse had to be thought up of, and she wasn't very creative with weaving tales of convincing bullshit to cover it up. She felt traces of fear that could rob the air from her lungs and simmering anger coming to a boiling point; so much of it that it reminded her of Kali's vengeance and old words she kept buried.

All she could bring herself to do is bury them deeper and deeper. Ignore it, stall it, pretend it was never there like she'd been doing these past years. It had been *working*, so why bother stopping. (*GET OUT OF MY HEAD.*)

But there was Mike, glassy-eyed and distressed. He hadn't made contact last night and all she could assume was something happened while he dropped the news to his parents. That something probably wasn't their approval.

And then Hop. He was upset, too, and she doubted the stakeout he claimed to be on was the cause of it.

The water was almost scalding when she stepped under the shower, rivulets searing down her skin. Steam quickly filled the room as she enveloped herself in the heat she craved every time she was pulled into that void (willingly or unwillingly). Her eyes fell shut, and the temptation to bring herself back there was strong, but she

remembered the lectures of *don't be nosy* and *let people have some goddamn privacy* after an unfortunate incident in which she found her adopted father and surrogate mother in a very, very compromising adult situation.

So, in the spirit of respect, she refrained on the fact that she'd see them both – Mike *and* Hop – throughout the day.

By the time El returned, all fresh and rosy cheeked while running a brush through her damp curls, Max was up and wrestling with the alarm clock.

"How are you even *up*," was her sleepy mumble, wildfire hair a knotted mop and blue-green eyes squinting. "I haven't even hit snooze once and you're showered like some decent human being ready to start the day? Wake me up in fifteen."

"Five."

"Ten."

It was five. One had to pick battles with a telekinetic wisely.

Mike had parked on school grounds way, way too early.

It was the only way he could even dodge his mother, although he was surprised she hadn't been ready to pounce with more inquiries the moment he stepped out of his bedroom at Asscrack O' Clock. Things hadn't escalated beyond their dispute from last night, thankfully, considering his father and Holly weren't out long and she at least had the discretion to keep him out of the loop. But she begged for answers to questions meant to be secrets, and he felt like a fucking moron for assuming that just because *one* parent was unobservant, the other one was too.

He mentally kicked himself for not even attempting to *lie*, either, but the surprise of it all shook him to the core and his reaction to the entire thing was damning enough. The timing of it all was shit

"Talk to me," she had pleaded, a tear rolling down her cheek. As much as he hated to see his mother cry, he couldn't *just talk*. And Mike

knew she'd ask again and again for answers, and if he didn't surrender them, then she would seek them elsewhere.

It was time to prepare for that scenario.

A large cup of coffee had been procured to guzzle as he waited. The sky swirled with pinks and yellows until the sun peeked over line of trees, the cars filled the lot and students poured in to roam. He lost himself in his thoughts, cycling through possible scenarios that wrecked his stomach but he knew he had to tell the Chief and El, foremost, as his mother wasn't about to let her suspicions go (considering she'd been stewing in them for the past couple years, yeah, no).

And maybe, maybe it wouldn't be the most *terrible* thing for her to know, because then maybe she would finally understand everything. She'd understand him more, and Nancy, and know what all had them change so abruptly in '83. But no parent really wanted to hear about their children involved in deadly battles with interdimensional monsters and government secrets, and he wasn't sure if she would process the information without blowing a gasket.

From his spot he could see the emergence of familiar faces. Dustin and Will arrived together, chatting animatedly amongst themselves, and later Lucas joined them after the morning rounds of greetings towards his baseball teammates. Guilt bubbled from purposefully staying where he was, hoping to avoid interaction. Mike didn't think he could force social cordialities. He was too antsy, too testy. They'd smell it on him and harass for details.

Soon, the roar of a pretentiously loud engine boomed and he recognized the speedy arrival of the mustang. His self-ejection from the car was instantaneous. Eleven came out of the passenger's side, dressed in overalls and some altered band shirt with sides that were purposefully cut and then tied into ribbon – she managed a bizarre balance of edgy and cute, a style all her own.

"It's too early to see you guys swap spit," Max grouched, still cranky from being deprived of her fifteen-minute morning snooze. Their presence had also been noticed as she could see the other three gather their things and begin their approach.

Mike either didn't hear the comment or flat-out ignored her. He reached to grab El's extra bag and kissed her lips, the gesture hurried. "Hey," he rasped, somewhat surprised at the hellish sound of his own voice, "any chance you're against playing hooky today?"

El didn't skip a beat. "Nope."

"Wait, what?" If Max wasn't all that awake before, she was awake *now*.

"Sorry," Mike lifted his gaze, sounding and looking a lot more apologetic than she expected - where was the biting sarcasm or the infamous roll of eyes? "Tell the guys for me? We'll, uh - tomorrow's Friday. I'll explain at the junkyard."

Oh. Shit must be serious. Maybe El was right to feel uneasy about Little Spoon announcing their post-high school plans to the parents. "Yeah, sure," Max nodded, the snark (mostly) shelved for the sake of her friends. "I've got the dudes. Go before they entrap you in riveting morning dribble."

A silent *thank you* was mouthed by Eleven before she was led away, and that was when the three so fondly accused of that aforementioned riveting morning dribble arrived with matching looks of befuddlement.

If only Max had a camera.

"Like that's not suspicious," Lucas frowned, and Max weaseled her way into the comfortable nook under his arm as a morning greet. He could almost, *almost* rival Mike in height and had weight in toned muscle, and the redhead appreciated the amount of chisel she could cuddle into when they weren't caught up in a whirlwind of disagreements. "I'm guessing you know what that's about?"

"I don't," Max admitted, "but I know Mike had a sit down with his parents about him and El shacking up after graduation. Whatever happened probably didn't end the way he wanted it to?"

That intel had spread among *all* of them already. Lucas knew from Dustin who was told by Mike; Max knew directly from El, and El had

also slipped the tidbit to Will the day of all while knowing Mike was going to ask, anyway. The Party Tree of Gossip never failed, and the news of the two radio-crossed lovers wanting to take the next step surprised absolutely no one.

"I'm sure it'll pass," Dustin supplied optimistically, adjusting his backpack straps. "Like, didn't the Wheelers have an issue with Nancy and Jonathan doing their thing, too? And that eventually passed, so. I mean, how'd Hopper take it?"

Will's eyes were still on Mike's car about to exit school grounds. "I heard he took it fine," he frowned, and wondered if something else was wrong too. "Mike was more worried about him than his parents. I wonder what they said that is making them skip class, though."

"Think he's just being dramatic?"

"He said he'd explain everything tomorrow night," Max said to Lucas. "Just gotta wait with bated breath until then, or whatever."

Dustin's nod was a sage one. "Extra beer it is, then. Sounds like we'll need it."

"Did Steve actually agree to get us shit?"

"How old is Steve again and *why* does he still hang out with us, I don't even know anymore," Lucas sighed, shaking his head.

"You'll all be thanking his gracious nature tomorrow night, mark my words!" huffed Dustin. "Just, uh – everyone chip in like a twenty or whatever."

"Do we even *need* that much?" Will walked along, the group finally migrating towards the building. "Who's even going to be the designated driver? Wait, how drunk is everyone even planning to get? Guys? C'mon."

Everyone shrugged.

Will sighed. *Jesus Christ.*

"Where are we going?" was the first question asked, and she drank in the view of his side profile – messy hair, troubled eyes, a flat-lined mouth and one hand curled around the steering wheel while the other was tangled up with hers, right over the console.

Mike's gaze flitted to her, briefly. "Have you eaten?"

El shook her head.

"Diner," he decided, the destination solidified. His place was out of the question until notice, and he didn't want to take her home *yet* – who knows if her dad was home, and he craved one-on-one time like a plant desperate for water.

"You're not okay."

Questions were pointless when she had a good grasp on the facts.

"I saw you," she continued in her soothing, quiet way, tightening her hold on his hand. "You were crying." If she'd gotten the luxury of being their longer, she would have let him know that he was there and *wasn't* alone. But that was another complication to touch on, later.

Mike exhaled a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "Mom thinks you're a Russian spy."

That wasn't what she expected to hear. *At all.*

"Sort of."

"I'm not Russian," she blinked, "or a spy."

"Obviously not, but she – um, she remembers, you know? When they were looking for you, and they went through the house a shit-dozen times trying to find you and they fed my parents the horse crap story of you being some dangerous fugitive," he explained, and his voice went a couple notches deeper than normal because the memory always, *always* sparked a little rage. "They showed her your picture in case she ever saw you around again, and I guess she never forgot your face. I don't think she was really *sure*, but she never thought to ask until last night. *Apparently.*"

Again, he'd never stop emphasizing the spectacularly shitty timing of all this.

Eleven went silent. He felt the nervous need to fill lack of words, so he went on. "She, um, she didn't bring it up in front of my dad, thankfully, you know he's more gung-ho about the government and kind of blind when it comes to all that. He was actually more supportive than she was even if he wasn't *excited*, but she's dead-set on figuring out what happened back then. I didn't even know what to say to her, or what I even *could* say. So I didn't say anything. I just... ended up locking myself in my room, like a fucking idiot."

"You're not an idiot, Mike."

He knew better than to argue with that, otherwise the banter would be infinite.

It didn't take long for them to arrive at the diner, right off the side of a highway on the outskirts of town. Neither of them were in a hurry to get out, and they remained inside, buckled up still, hand-in-hand while they processed.

Or *she* processed. Mike was awaiting a response, and it came after a thoughtful pause and a perplexed scrunch of her nose. "She has an issue with us moving in together because..."

It wasn't the spy thing. The spy thing wasn't true. According to him, Mrs. Wheeler *sort of* thought she was a spy. It was the association with danger that was the issue, and that was at least very, very true.

"I'm dangerous."

"No, she *thinks* –"

"Mike –"

"*Stop*." He had to let her hand go so he could *squeeze* something without hurting her, and that something was the steering wheel. "You're not dangerous. *They are*. Them. The damn Bad Men, the government. There's a difference. I want her to understand that difference. I need her to. That's why I want to talk to the Chief today, *hopefully*, before she finds him first and starts throwing questions at

him."

The grip loosened and he visibly deflated, tired.

"I don't want her to think you're bad for me when you're always saving my ass, El. It's not fair."

There was a clink and clip of steel, shifting of weight, the opening of a car door, the sight of her exiting. Mike mimicked her movements, unsure of what the hell she was planning to do. For a split second he feared something he said made her upset, but all that was erased when she met him on the driver's side and pushed him into the door.

And just like that, they ensnared one another – her arms tight around his waist, his nose pressed against her temple and he breathed the scent of her in (a little different this time; the shampoo she had used that morning definitely wasn't hers), and he took comfort in the fact that they fit *so goddamn well*. Like two puzzle pieces finally brought together.

"We'll talk to him," Eleven nuzzled the crook of his neck, having to tilt up against her toes for better reach. He was warm and everything familiar. "We'll figure it out."

It was what they *did*. Back then it was always the simple things; the dancing, everything that occurred beyond the realm of *just kissing*, the dating, jealousies and insecurities and all the emotional baggage. A lot of firsts had been shared between them, and it didn't matter if they were easy, or awkward, or *hard*. They always figured it out. Together.

Mike ducked to close the height difference between them for a kiss that was anything but brief or chaste. It was *needy*, and tongueless; a search for intimate comfort that he always found in her, and despite their literal lack of privacy from being outside, El didn't have the shame to ever deny what he sought. Her mouth was on his, the taste of him bittersweet like the coffee he'd drank, and her fingers twisted into his shirt as she pushed up against him. Their bodies felt like metals being welded together, fused by heat.

His hands slid down her sides. There was a sliver of exposed skin

from the somewhat short crop of shirt that he couldn't stop stroking. It felt like being touched by feathers, and she let out the sweetest of giggles into the kiss.

His lips formed a smile against hers; the first smile he had even allowed himself in the past twelve or more hours. Really, the world could be on fire and on the verge of complete decimation all around them, but if their last moments were like this? Mike would have the same look.

"To be continued?" he murmured against her, and she was still kissing him – pecks this time, all adoring and affectionate, and Mike wanted nothing more than to *keep* continuing. Eventually El nodded, smiling at him too, and they pulled apart to finally enter the diner. The aroma of bacon hit them so hard his stomach actually made a noise of need.

They caught one another up over breakfast, something sweet and savory for them to split. Waffles doused in a mountain of whipped cream and berries, a pile of sizzling bacon straight from the grill, and Eleven ordered her first caffeinated beverage of the morning while Mike got his second. Their booth was a tight, tiny thing in the corner, but it felt like a world of their own as she discussed her time with Max, mentioning their short and awkward encounter with Billy (*"Seriously? Why does that wastoid stick around? I thought he hated it here?"*).

In turn, he shared details of the dinner he had with the guys, in which Will revealed the inspiration of his art project to him – so of course it spiraled into a debate of whether or not any characters based on *them* should have super awesome powers or not, and ways to diverge the whole storyline to avoid making it seem like an X-Men rip-off.

All the support for it made her happy. Will seemed really determined to go through with it too; he needed his own side of the story to be out there somehow, even if everyone chalked it up to pure fiction.

"Our waitress had to tell us to shut up a couple times," Mike stirred his coffee with a snort, "because it got stupidly heated, and if we weren't publicly known as complete nerds before I'd almost be a little

embarrassed. Dustin's so *loud*."

Tongue in cheek, El tried suppressing her grin. "You get loud, too."

"No way, not like *him*."

He knew that look she was giving him translated to: *you're full of shit but okay*.

"Anyway," Mike huffed, taking a gulp from his mug, "when's Hopper's estimated time of arrival back to your place? Did he mention anything?" He kind of hoped the man didn't have an issue with him staying over for most of the day – just until he figured out how the fuck he was going to face his mother without seeming like a fumbling fool.

"No," she sighed, picking at the remaining bits of breakfast, "but I saw him last night, too."

"On purpose?"

El shook her head. "I try not to. It just happened again, and I was... *there*. From sleeping. I saw you. I saw Hop. He was upset about something, too."

All right, *weird*. "Yeah? About what?"

"I don't know. I didn't even see him long enough to figure out where he was."

"Did you...see the window again? The light in the lab?"

"No."

That's good, at least.

"I saw a door instead."

Oh for fuck's sake I take that back. She couldn't have led with that instead? His heart was panicking enough as it was.

"I think –" Eleven breathed in deep, eyebrow furrowed in the middle.

"I think Mama is trying to tell me something. I heard her."

Mike didn't like any of it. "You guys don't really communicate *this* far a distance."

"It's hard. Not impossible. Just hard."

Time spent together. Practice. An arrangement had been made with her Aunt Becky; she would keep her mouth shut about everything, and she would get a break every couple Saturdays or so when Eleven visited her biological mother and took over the caretaking. Sometimes with Hopper, sometimes with Joyce, sometimes with both.

(Other times with different company, like Mike or Will or *also* both. Whoever had free time and was willing. It had been an arrangement that worked well.)

He expected her to say more, but she didn't. Instead she nursed her coffee, blowing on it before taking a small sip, and diverted her gaze out the large glass windows to the captivating scenery of absolutely *nothing*. A bunch of trees, a road, and a dumpster.

There was an elephant in the room and she was acting like it didn't exist.

Mike knew he had to tread carefully, but sometimes being blunt with her worked better than tiptoeing around her feelings. "Something's gotta be behind that door," he said. "If not something, *someone*."

Oh, there it was. His girlfriend was eyeing him now, all narrowed, and he could almost hear the word *don't* transfer from her mind to his, no movement of lips needed.

What he was about to suggest next was something he wished he'd never have to ask. "If what that guy told you back in Chicago was true," Mike ground his teeth, "then maybe you should look and see if _"

"Together or separate?"

Both of their attentions swiveled to the waitress and she almost

regretted interrupting whatever the heck she interrupted.

"Uh, together," he mumbled, reaching for his wallet.

"I have cash –"

"No, I got this –"

"We're splitting it," El snapped a little too loudly. She was annoyed and her expression of it was clearly misdirected at their check.

The waitress set down just one receipt, told them to take their time, and turned to leave. Both pulled out currency, and both placed it on the table – Mike first, and she set her part of it on top of his.

Their fingers brushed and, in an apology, El didn't let his go.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"Promise?"

He pulled her hand up to kiss it. "Yeah," he whispered. "Promise."

The conversation wasn't over. Eleven knew it would come around again like a boomerang, and all she wanted was to pretend a little longer.

At first he didn't *like* the cabin, let's just say. Not like his opinion mattered – he didn't live in it – but he thought it was too far away from things, and it was small, and kind of grungy. By then he knew his naïve wish of her living with him (but, you know, not like a *sister*) when he was twelve wasn't going to happen, but had she really been living in *that* the entire time? Jim Hopper, Chief of Police, couldn't do any *better*?

(Mike had, admittedly, been a little bitter and petty about the whole thing. Yeah, yeah, he knew the Chief tried. Bite him.)

To be fair, the place had been recovering from a recent telekinetic

tantrum and was cluttered with a bunch of heaters from Will's Mind Flayer Exorcism (Dustin had a knack for naming things, he really did) when he first saw it. It had been a group effort fixing it up; Jonathan and Steve lent their older hands in helping replace broken windows, refurbishing the floors, adding a fresh coat of paint to the walls, fixing old pipes and wires. Will's mom handled some basic furnishings, like new curtains that didn't smell moldy, cleaner sheets and pillows, and less rusty kitchen appliances purchased cheaply from a thrift store.

Mike contributed when he can; from movies to books, his favorite blanket, board games for her to read up on and learn. He couldn't always be there, and she seemed comforted when she had some of his things with her.

Eventually, old things were replaced with somewhat less old things. It started with a couch with springs that didn't stab you when sitting, a mattress for Hopper that didn't kill his back, a nice vintage dresser for Eleven. If she was going to be stuck there for a second mandatory year of seclusion, then it needed to stop feeling like a cottage-prison and more like an actual home.

Even if that home involved stepping carefully over strategically placed tripwire to get there. Some things would probably never change, but now Mike could safely say he liked this place. It was something hers. It had pictures now, for all of them – with her – and it was physical proof to the world that she existed. That she was *someone*, and not some subject meant to be a nobody at a laboratory.

The porch came to view at the end of their brief trek through the woods. There were small, plotted plants on each step leading up, butterfly wind chimes hanging from the overhead, a bench swing with a blanket tossed over it. He was home – the parked truck they saw off the path was a solid confirmation of it – and they looked at one another for courage before they entered.

Inside was warm, smelling like the apple-cinnamon candle often lit to hide the stench of cigarettes. Dressed in his uniform, Jim Hopper sat at the tiny two-person table with an expression that was tired, grumpy, *confused* –

And with a bottle of Wild Turkey next to him. It wasn't even noon.

"I'm gonna go on a limb here," he started, taking off his hat and running his hand over the greying cap of hair, "and say that the two of you have a really, really good excuse as to why you're not in school."

Eleven dropped her bags by the door after closing it with her powers. "And you must have an equally good excuse as to why you're drinking this early in the morning."

It was fair talkback because she assumed correctly, and Hopper reached for a cigarette to light afire. "Fine," he sighed, flicking off the first few specks of ash. "Get comfortable. You two are going first."

6. Compromised

Mike was nervous, and Eleven knew every sign. The incessant bouncing of his knee, the twitch of his jaw, how he postured himself on the couch angled forward at a tilt, unable to actually *get* comfortable. There was no way around it.

She was also plainly aware that it took him conscious effort to *not* pace an actual trench in the heart of the living room. He paced when he was upset – it helped him talk, he once explained – but he needed to sit, focus, stare Hopper in the eye and unleash all that had happened the night before in a form of coherent word-vomit.

How his mom was paid more attention than he gave her credit for.

How she remembered the picture shown to her, and how she suspected that she and El were one in the same.

What Mike didn't explicitly mention was his mother's disapproval of their plans. Obviously she was going to have an opinion about her son sharing space with an accused spy, and that wasn't going to change until all the misconceptions were cleared and truth came to light.

Jim got the idea, anyway. El did too, trying not to take it personally even if it stung.

There were hints of guilt, she realized, as Mike continued to hastily explain; almost like he felt it was his fault that the pot was stirred by his mother (albeit with good intentions). She stretched her hand over his lap to tighten over his knee comfortingly. That bouncing stopped.

He paused, inhaled sharply and met her eyes. All it took was a quiet exchange of looks for Mike to settle a little and ground himself.

It didn't go unnoticed.

"I doubt she's going to mention it to my dad," he carried on. El leaned towards him more, rubbing her nose into his shoulder. "They've got some issues they're sorting out, like in counseling and stuff. He's kind

of just ate up what the agents told him anyway, and I'm pretty sure she feels like she was fed some kind of cover up story."

A gravelly hum rumbled from Hopper's throat as he thought. What he *really* wanted to do at that very moment was polish off the rest of that goddamn bottle of bourbon but he didn't want to recklessly imbibe like an alcoholic in front of them. Instead of harming his liver, he continued to administer willing damage into his lungs in the form of smokes.

Eleven wished she could have one without him ripping her a new asshole.

"I sure as hell don't want her to start asking the wrong *people* questions," the Chief grouched, kneading the exhaustion from his eyes. It was an unexpected development he'd prefer not to deal with, but he wasn't upset. Shit happened. He knew that life lesson better than most. "You know your mom best, kid. How do you think she'll take it if we lay down the ugly truth?"

Good question.

"Probably cry." Mike winced. "Probably cry a lot, honestly. I think she'd be upset about all the secrecy, and that Nancy and I didn't... come to her when there was trouble."

"Which is a natural reaction for any parent to have," Hop sympathized. "How do you think she'll take the truth about - ?" The question trailed off at the end, and the cigarette was pointed towards El.

Mike was immediately on the defense. "It's not like any of it was her fault! Once we explain it to my mom she'll get it, and it's not like we don't have proof or a handful of *actual witnesses* of what happened."

"*I know*, Mike, but you have to realize," he disposed of his cigarette on the ashtray, "that she might not warm up to things right away, alright? It might take time for her to come to terms with this shit – she wasn't there for it like we all were. She'll need time."

It was something to definitely take into consideration.

Eleven had been quiet throughout the majority of the conversation, but it seemed like the opportune moment to cut in. Her words came out gentle and soft, yet she still managed to demand both of their attentions. "Maybe she will need to hear it first from parents. You, and Joyce. Maybe she will understand it coming from you two more than us, and then I can talk to her."

"You want to talk to my *mom*?"

"Yes," she firmly replied, and the two stared at one another. His look was incredulous, and hers was nothing short of fearless (and so fucking *pretty*). "I understand, Mike. I understand if she thinks being with me puts you in danger, because she isn't wrong. But I want her to know that I'll protect you. That I won't let someone hurt you because of me."

Honestly, she didn't *intend* it to be some kind of moment that was probably better off being private – because Hop coughed to clear his throat, wishing he was in another room – but she had no regret. El had needed to say it, so she did, and it didn't hurt for her father figure to hear it.

Mike was speechless, and a little red, and his mouth opened to say something until he was beaten to it.

"It's not a bad idea," Hopper relented. Letting the adults clear the air first before allowing the younger ones to chime in with their input – maybe if they shared *their* point of view, Karen would understand more. "I'll talk to Joyce in a bit and see what she says. I take it you've got no objections?"

"I don't," he said, tearing his gaze away from the intensity that was his girlfriend. "I'll try and smooth things out with her. I don't know how patient she'll be, but she trusts you and Will's mom. That's gotta go for something."

I hope.

But he wasn't done just yet. "There's, um, something else you should know, though."

El made an uncomfortable noise. Hop's face twisted with impatience at how Mike seemed to be stalling and, instead, nodded his head towards his girlfriend

There must have been some kind of hint that Eleven took from that because she squirmed, brought her legs up and curled into the couch. Her hands were between her and her knees, and she restlessly plucked at the braided blue bracelet on her left wrist. It was *always* on that wrist, right above the *011*.

One symbolized the past, and the other the present.

"There's a light in the lab," she came to confess after she was gently nudged. "Just one."

Hop's reaction was kinda strange, Mike thought. There was no colorful string of curses, nor the same look of dread that had mirrored his when *he* first found out. Instead he sighed, the breath slipping from his nose, and the man looked oddly resigned.

Mike narrowed his eyes as he arrived to a conclusion. "You knew, didn't you."

"I don't know about any damn *one light* because there's tons of lights on at the lab right now," he gruffly corrected. "But just *listen to me* before you open your mouth next."

He *knew* Mike had shit to say, even if he didn't exactly know what the hell he was talking about right then. *Mouthy, infuriatingly likeable little shit*. "Feds showed up at the station yesterday morning. Their presence is hush-hush for now, but we need to make *extra fucking sure* we're on our best behavior. No powers out in the open. None. I don't give a shit if you're trying to save orphans from a burning bus, El, you use *nothing*."

No promises, she thought. Mike passed her a look like he overheard. He probably did, or at least got the impression she was being mentally defiant.

"Supposedly they missed a couple things during their sweep right before officially shutting the lab down, and they suspect whatever

sensitive information remaining has been compromised. They're – temporarily – re-opening the damn thing with a skeleton crew, getting their shit, and then getting the hell out before they catch attention."

Any details pertaining to that 'sensitive information' weren't given to him. *Classified*, they had said, although he had a couple suspicions that didn't let him rest.

"Compromised," El repeated, the word rolling off her tongue funny because she knew in this context it didn't mean 'halfway happy.' Language was strange. "By who?"

"I didn't ask," was Hop's sour reply. "I'm just doing what they're telling me to do for now and hope they'll fuck off without another glance at our direction, El."

Mike catapulted himself off the couch and, whoop, *there it was*. The pacing. "So, what, whoever the hell's been in the lab this entire time isn't even government? How do we *know* that the information in there's not about her? Or that this is all just a bullshit smoke screen and they're here to –"

"*Calm the fuck down*," Hopper growled. The pacing stopped, and fire met fire when they looked at one another. It was 1984 again, and he half-expected the now-much-taller-not-really-kid to come at his ribs. "We *talked* about this. There was always a chance. There was always a risk. But no matter what they can't just take her whenever they feel like it – she's got papers, she's got relationships here, people know her as *my daughter*, and they're know they can't have a strong presence here. Not after the national shitshow of a news they were involved in."

"Except she saw the lab in that *void*, Hop, without even looking for it!" It had been a detail skimmed from the beginning, and now it was out in the open for the Chief to gawk at. "You know there's always going to be a chance it's actually –"

The telephone book whizzed through the air at high-speed – right between Hop and Mike – and hit the wall with such force that pages were dislodged. They floated to the ground in silence because that's

what El had wanted for just a couple seconds.

Silence.

They were both at the receiving end of her glare and, for her sake, simmered down. Mike didn't look pleased but he mumbled a quick 'sorry' before dropping back onto the couch.

Hopper cut through the quiet after a minute. He was calmer, and felt kind of hurt. "Why didn't you come to me about this sooner?"

Eleven avoided his gaze, struggling against the urge to tighten up into a smaller ball and hide somewhere – but that was childish, and she wasn't a child. "I wanted it to be nothing," she whispered, stoic and ice cold.

That was how she addressed anything that could lead to the topic of *him*. Lucas and Dustin knew better to even try. Will and Max, well – they *heard* but neither of them were there for it, so none of their talks had much of a risk leading up to the Bad Man Figure. Hopper made attempts (Owens had suggested that, perhaps, normalizing talks about her childhood would help), but she wasn't always forthcoming with the details. He at least knew about Chicago, knew about this 'sister,' knew something fucked up happened. Others he guessed by observing certain triggers, and she always struggled to hide those like she was ashamed.

That was the extent of it.

Mike had the most success. None that he openly shared with Hopper - much to his aggravation - but he dropped hints and suggestions that helped the frustrated father understand better (all without violating her trust, which he knew was important). And even the times he was shut out, he had incredible patience. He couldn't cure her troubles, but he somehow had helped her live with them in the best way she could.

Hopper's forehead creased. "It doesn't work that way, El."

"I know that," she snapped. "I'm not stupid."

"I didn't say –"

Eleven scowled, straightening her legs and scooting to the edge of the sofa. "*I can handle it*. If something happens. If – If *Papa* isn't really gone," she didn't even choke at the weight of that man's title, needing to convince herself more than anyone else, "then I can handle it. I can handle him."

Their talk was over.

For the most part.

In the end, the emotions had run high because of *feelings*, and, well, while they hadn't hugged it out in the end, the sentiment was there regardless. Later they would regroup, discuss their options again with more reason, and ultimately keep one another close and *in the know* of all whereabouts. Hopper let them be for now. He was drained, in desperate need of hot shower, sleep, and shots of bourbon in between all that because *fuck his life*.

Mike was given the green light to stay. He was advised that if he was going to contact his sister, wait until he reached a payphone and keep the conversation short just in case - but first El insisted he take some time to rest. All the cups of coffee in the world wouldn't be enough to make him stop *yawning*.

Her room was where they ended up. It was tiny, everything soft, and drawing inspiration from Nancy's old room were the collages of photos over the years. Some cute, some horrendously unflattering, but loved all the same because they were snapshots of happy memories. They swiped off the stuffed animals crowding her bed, pulled up the blanket that used to be his, and crawled in. They fit best against one another on their sides.

True to their fifty-fifty spooning deal, that afternoon he was the Big Spoon (*Eat it, Max*).

He nosed away her stray curls and pressed his mouth against the back of her neck. "You okay?" Mike mumbled, his arm over her waist while his hand was under the front of her overalls, fingers splayed over her stomach.

There was a small lift of her shoulders, the semblance of a shrug. He held her tighter, dusting her nape with tired kisses. He knew she wasn't. It wasn't every day - or ever - that she uttered the promise of a threat towards the man that abused her for twelve years, let alone openly *address* him like he still existed.

"I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything."

"Yes," she made a sound from frustration. "*Complicated.*" As in, *I'm complicated, I make everything complicated.*

Mike rolled her over until they were nose to nose - his all pale and spotted, hers like a button and currently scrunched, an expression of all her troubles. His hand relocated to the small of her back. Hers slipped under his shirt, warming her cold palms against his skin.

"Worth it," he smirked and kissed her again, this time on her frowny lips that still held the taste of maple syrup from breakfast. "Always."

Eleven softened, looking into those sleepy eyes, and they rubbed noses affectionately until his eyelashes fell to his cheeks, and his face went slack as he dozed. All the worry lines that aged him beyond his young years vanished (he cared so much about others, sometimes *too* much). She knew they would return. They always did.

For an hour she watched him, content to listen to his breath. And when she was sure he was lulled into a deep sleep, she strategically – *carefully* – detangled their limbs without waking him. He stirred, made a noise comically similar to a whine, but eased when she placed a tender kiss on his forehead and pulled the blanket over him.

The door was willed shut behind her, and she went throughout the cabin.

It was a little messy and a lot *stinky*, the stench of tobacco clinging to the furnishings, so she lit an extra candle and cleared the ashtray. Hop's Wild Turkey was put away (after she curiously sniffed it, and how could he *drink* that?) and she gathered the fallen pages of the phonebook to stuff inside and put away. Straightening up and

clearing some clutter were mindless tasks, but as soon as she was done she felt her mind wander elsewhere. Dangerously.

Television was the next candidate up for distractions. It didn't keep her captivated for long, showing reruns of episodes she'd seen one too many times, and the one in question was all about how Hannah's grand revelation of her family ties, about how her father wasn't *actually* her father, and instead was some vengeful prison escapee that -

"No," she huffed. It was shut off with a flick of her head.

El was aggravated, up until she remembered a pile of comics Dustin *insisted* she read. *The Dark Phoenix Saga*, which looked a little intense, was tucked neatly into the bookshelf right where she had left it.

Except it was *depressing* because it was all about how Jean Grey came into contact with some cosmic being that possessed her, and then ate an entire star and destroyed some kind of galactic civilization. Which, *wow*, comic books illustrated some extreme stuff. In the end it all came down to a final stand between Cyclops and Jean, her heartfelt goodbye and sacrifice. It was *upsetting*. Why wasn't she warned about this damn major character death?

It was a successful distraction, but, *god*. At what *cost*.

By the time she heard movement from the bedrooms she had transitioned into the kitchen, working some simple culinary magic over the stove. It wasn't much. All the rummaging she did through the fridge and cabinets made her realize they were in desperate need of groceries, and the only thing she could make was grilled cheese sandwiches with a side of slightly stale chips.

Hopper came to view when he stood beside her, preparing the coffee pot. Nothing was said until he set his large hand atop her head and ruffled that hair he liked to mess up often. It either annoyed her or made her smile. This time it was a smile, even if it was morose one.

"I should have been nicer."

"You mean you weren't? Hm, must be used to your bratty attitude

then or something," he chuckled. "I get it. It's somewhat of a fucked situation and I probably owe that damn jar about fifty bucs by now."

El agreed, plating the first sandwich. It was his. He needed to put something in his stomach other than liquor. "Your stakeout was at the lab last night, wasn't it."

"Yeah. It was."

"You were upset."

"Yeah," he paused, reluctant to even admit it. "I was."

She poured him a side of chips and offered him a spoon to stir the sugar into his coffee. He took it, the clinking against the mug filling the quiet.

"You won't lose me," El whispered, blinking those big Bambi eyes at him. Sometimes, Hopper swore she could get into people's minds - but no, this was her knowing him like a daughter knew her father. "No matter what happens."

Hopper knew if he spoke he would choke on his words.

He hugged her instead, and she joined him for lunch.

A/N: Much thanks to all of those who have expressed their likings to this in all the different ways! Um, so this is obviously a very slow burn kind of story because I like to flesh out the feels, hence this entire chapter dedicated to the long-awaited talk, lol, so apologiesss! basically the plan is to really flesh out El's trauma because WOW, what a doozy childhood (obviously), and Brenner will eventually make an appearance but not in the way most probably think? so, yeah :D

thank you for reading my dribble! 3

7. Apology Cookies

Mike had done everything in his power to stall himself from going home. He napped a little too hard and a little too long, then lounged around the confines of his girlfriend's pretty-in-pink bedroom - with contradictory splashes of something black and feisty - under the pathetic excuse that he just needed to skim through some chapters of his textbook, because *tests and things*, while taking his sweet, darling time nibbling through the his own grilled cheese sandwich and terribly old chips.

El had at least allowed him to at least shake off the grogginess of midday sleep before she yanked him half-off the mattress with a playful telekinetic pull. "Up," she commanded.

He surrendered, hair a mess and clothes all crooked and socks barely on his feet. "Fine, fine. Where'd Hopper go?"

"To see Joyce."

"Oh," he blinked, and then cheekily added, "so we have *privacy*."

"Mike," she said, although her smile was involuntary and cute. He couldn't help but at least take the opportunity to lean down and *kiss* her for a while. No interruptions, no paranoia, no rush. No real *funny business* that time, either, but they were both content nonetheless.

Then they readied themselves with purpose, driving out to a lonely payphone right outside the Hawkins town line. After two failed attempts, running out of change, and a certain someone somehow managing to fuck with the inside of the machine to dispense the coins it ate for another go, Jonathan had been the one to pick up on the third try.

All the details were kept short and concise, and he referred to his watch constantly to make sure they weren't going over the time limit. "Everything's okay," Mike emphasized in the booth, "or, um, going to be okay."

He winced. It didn't sound convincing.

"For now," was the sigh on the other side, though he promised to do his best to relay the gravity of the situation to Nancy that wouldn't induce a major panic. Honestly, Jonathan suspected he'd fail. How else was she going to take her *mother* being in on their complicated web of secrecies? Government cover-ups were one thing; monsters were something else entirely. "I'll tell her tonight."

"Thanks, Jonathan."

They ended it right at sixty-five seconds.

Mike argued there was still time before he absolutely and positively *had* to head back home, so he offered to take El to the store to stock up the kitchen considering how dismal their food supply was. And as it turned out, the sheer normalcy of running down grocery aisles with his girlfriend huddled up in a shopping cart, giggling madly, had been the most therapeutic thing of the day.

His heart must have stupidly swelled several sizes too big for his chest when her lips pulled into a closed-mouth grin and asked, "Are we still riding in these when we become 'official adults' living together?"

After grabbing a box of chocolate chip Eggos from the commercial freezer (it was the first thing on the shopping list, no shit), he replied with his best serious face, "Only if you promise to take turns, you're a little spoiled thanks to me."

She had a look of mock-offense. His own look dared her to challenge his statement, and they laughed and teased one another and it was just *that simple*.

It was as if nothing was wrong, like nothing else *mattered*. Mike realized that sometimes it was okay to pretend that was true. It didn't make their moments any less genuine, and he was at least glad that all the bullshit rising didn't seem to thwart their visions of the future, as fragile as it all currently seemed.

Then the sky darkened, the sun disappearing under the horizon, and that was when they knew time was up. Mike had reality to face.

Which, uh, he soon discovered smelled a *lot* like childhood nostalgia – peanut butter cookies, their scent overwhelmingly rich and sweet, with the house warmed from the use of the oven. It was the last thing he came to expect. He blinked, trying to remember the last time she'd even baked them.

Sadly, he barely could. Maybe before his sister left?

It was a clever way to lure him in for a conversation, he'd admit. Part of him wanted to escape up the stairs and stall even more, but it was a very tiny part that was easily squashed.

She was trying. He needed to try, too.

Mike swallowed his nerves. His hands toyed with his key ring, the jingling catching her attention as stood – or *towered*, like Karen was thinking, forever amazed at the height of her only son – by the entryway. "Um, hey mom."

Great way to start this conversation.

The kitchen was unsurprisingly spotless. Cleaning was always a stress outlet, and she wiped every counter, crook and nanny of the room until she could see her reflection. "Your father's going to be coming home late," she offered an uneasy smile, "and your sister is with a friend. I didn't know if you were going somewhere else for dinner so I opted to make you dessert. Your favorite?"

They were. "Thanks, but you didn't –"

"They're apology cookies, Michael," Karen blurted, squeezing the washcloth in her hands tight. "I'm trying to apologize and talk. Please. Talk to me?"

He couldn't say no.

"Okay," he conceded, pulling up a wooden bar stool to sit on. His knee bounced again, and this time El wasn't around to stop it. "I'm not mad at you, mom. You know that, right?"

"I didn't," she admitted with relief, turning to grab the milk carton from the fridge and two glasses. "But it's nice to hear."

"Are *you* mad at me?"

"I'm not. I'm *worried*, which can sometimes come across as angry, but I'm...not."

She passed him a full glass of milk, and the mountain of plated cookies was right in the middle. Mike reached for one first. The top layer was fresh; all soft and gooey and pinched between his fingers, and then soon melting when it hit his mouth.

"Your school called," his mother resumed, and boy, could he hear the little bit of judgment dripping from her tone, claiming a cookie of her own. "You skipped today?"

Aw, *shit*. He forgot they'd be doing that. Mike fought back a groan. "Yeah, I skipped." Was it a good thing that she didn't look upset? Was it a trap? He waited a couple seconds to see if a lecture was in his cards but it never came, and he selected the route of honesty to explain. "Jane and I both skipped. It was my idea. I picked her up so we could go, um, talk to her dad about stuff."

Karen's response was curt and quickly regretted. "It must have been a very urgent 'talk' to skip an entire day of school."

"Well, you have a lot of questions and accused my girlfriend of being a Russian spy – when she's definitely *not*, by the way – so I figured her father might want to know so he could clear up a couple things. You know, for the sake of transparency." Look, Mike *tried* not to sound annoyed, but he couldn't be held responsible for the things his face did. He had been told he wore the look of *what the fuck, seriously* extremely well and he assumed he had that very look on.

And then he felt like the biggest douchebag on the entire fucking planet, because *hurt* was all over her face and he could have been nicer, should have been nicer, but this wasn't the easiest thing to talk about when he still couldn't tell her all that much.

"Mom, I'm –"

"I'm not here to start a fight with you, I'm not." Her fingers flexed as she summoned the words. "I'm just... so *frustrated*, because everything

you're telling me is vague and wrapped around this strange secrecy I'm not apart of. I'm sure it would be so much easier for you if I pretended I didn't notice a thing, but I can't. I *do* notice. You act like you need to hurry and grow up, and I wish I knew what makes you think you have to. I wish I knew what *made* you grow up faster than you should have."

Had it been their parenting? Karen obsessed over it. Things weren't always perfect – and nowadays, they were *far* from perfect between her and Ted – but it had all started before their marital issues erupted. *Before* the fights, before the marriage counseling, before Nancy's absence changed their dynamics.

Really, she was sure it all maybe began when they had picked him up outside the middle school, ambulances blaring all around them and agents scouring the grounds. He was so much *smaller* back then, still her little boy, and he crumbled and sobbed in her arms, the cause of his cries all but muffled words into her blouse.

She remembered the pounding rain that night; the drilling questions from the agents, Mike's stubborn refusal to divulge any details. He didn't sleep much for days. Weeks, even, all for a girl he hid in their basement. For a girl who re-appeared under strange circumstances with a name, a backstory that was likely false, and whose relationship with her son made it seem like they'd known each other their whole lives. He seemed better afterwards, but never the same.

Then that relationship progressed with no natural end in sight and when did young romances suddenly become so *serious*? Karen told herself that college would change things even if that thought didn't hold true for her oldest. They were planning a *future* together at such a young age, and it made her realize she finally *had* to confirm all those nagging suspicions that plagued her over the years.

"We're going to *tell you*," Mike promised desperately, his dark eyes pleading. "We are, mom, look at me – just look at me, okay? I promise we're going to tell you. Chief Hopper's going to talk to you first, and then I'll fill in the blanks from there. It's going to be a lot. It's going to sound kind of nuts but it's true, all of it. And no matter what, you have to keep it a secret. It's really, really important that you don't tell *anyone*. Not even dad. Because telling other people?

That's what puts us in danger. Not El."

It was a slip he caught too late. Luckily she seemed to miss it (she didn't), although now he was self-conscious of all the times she may have overheard him say *El* and not *Jane*.

Karen couldn't help the sniffing. She daintily wiped under her eyes, careful not to smear the makeup of the day as her maternal instincts screamed and screamed. They wanted answers *now*, but reason told her she couldn't unload on him like the night before.

"Okay," she granted, not all the way pleased, but relieved they were meeting halfway somehow. It was better than what she had gotten with Nancy (which was absolutely nothing and nowhere). "I'll wait. I won't - I won't say anything, I swear. You can trust me, Michael."

He was so smart and responsible and just – she loved him *so much*. He was sweet and kind, sensitive to others and their feelings. He wasn't her youngest, yet he would always be her baby boy no matter how grown up he was on the inside and out. If she wanted him to trust her, then she needed to trust him. It was the only way.

Finally, he could breathe. Tension kept knotting every strand of muscle, but at least the air came back. "Thanks," he mumbled, smiling slightly and earnestly. "It means...a lot to me, mom. More than you'd ever know."

Mike reached for another cookie to dunk, mostly so he could do something aside from fidgeting in his seat. After the threat of tears vanished and her throat felt less constricted, she did the same.

"I'm sorry I was so hard on you last night."

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more."

"Are we still friends?"

"*Mom.*"

"Just checking."

He rolled his eyes, but at that moment, their smiles finally matched.

A/N: short chapter! originally this chapter was gonna include a lot of party interactions but I figured the Mike and Karen interaction needed to be its own thing. thanks for reading! :)

8. Circle of Discussion

A/N: Quick warning that there's some very glossed over sexy times at the end, but it's nothing graphic and just mostly schmoopy poetic stuff between two eighteen year olds? I don't want to catch anyone off guard/offend anyone so, y'know. Thanks for reading! This chapter took forever and serves as the 'calm before the storm' part of all this before things get weird.

It was Friday. All of them were greeted with folded pieces of notebook paper slipped inside their locker - courtesy of one Dustin Henderson - tasking each party member with a respective 'quest item' or 'quest objective' for their scheduled festivities. Mysteriously (*snort*), he *also* was out of sight when the discoveries were made, knowing it would draw the five Party members into a Circle of Discussion™ before classes began.

(El, actually, was the only one that noticed him around the corner rubbing his hands together like a diabolical puppet master watching his marionettes dance. She let him have his moment. It was cute.)

"Mine's a list of snacks," Lucas broadcasted first during their huddle, the flowing stampede of student body moving along around them. "He can't honestly expect me to be the one buying all this. I'm going to smack the shit out of him."

Max held hers up. "Mine says I need to go with you and make sure you actually get the listed snacks. Look, in small letters it reads 'protein bars don't count.'" Lucas had become the most fit and healthiest of them all. It was a travesty. "He's got a point, you know."

"Just because I don't always like to stuff my face with processed *sugar* _"

"You've changed so much from the man I used to know!"

"Because I'm actively trying not to get diabetes?"

"Who the hell drinks beer while snacking on *protein bars*, Lucas? Seriously?"

Will brushed off the bickering. At this rate it was their language of romance, the exchanges as normal as the sky being blue. "I have to get music?" The boom box his brother left behind came to mind. It'd work nicely. "That's easy."

"I have to drive you to your place so you can *get* your music," Mike read his with skepticism, running his fingers through his much-too-long, barely combed hair.

"Kinda makes sense on behalf of the fact that I don't have a vehicle of my own?"

"True."

El was the last to reveal hers to the group, complete with her token nonchalance. "I have to go with Dustin. He needs my brain."

Officially *the* strangest quest item announced. It didn't faze her.

"Of *course* he does." Mike craned his neck to peek and *behold*, it literally read that very thing in familiar chicken scrawl. *I need your brain – Dustin*. He suspected it was code. "Wonder what the hell for?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," she shrugged, tucking note into the pocket of her jeans. It was definitely code. Dustin needed her unique skill set for whatever reason, and she seemed every bit unbothered by it. In turn, her boyfriend was every bit *bothered* by it.

He looked to her, an equal mix of annoyance and concern. *Not even for orphans, remember?*

Discretion, hers eyes expressed, a little vexed, *I know what it means. Don't worry.*

Max shared flummoxed looks with Lucas and Will (the latter not surprised at all) as they bore witness to – uh, whatever the fuck *that* exchange was. "You guys keep doing that. Telepathic marital dispute, much?"

"It kinda seems more like a Vulcan Mind Meld?" Will suggested, then sighed when she stared at him cluelessly. "Really? You've been around us how long and you can't even remember what that is?"

We've failed you. Officially."

"I'm...ashamed, really."

"Shut up, Lucas. Is that a Star Wars thing?"

"Star Trek," El cleared her throat to correct Max. Mike's disgruntled spell broke to proudly smirk. "We weren't arguing, anyway."

No, that would involve being vocal, *loud*, shouting feelings at one another as chaos unfurled. Flickering lights, doors bursting open like spirits running rampant, windows cracking. Arguments of that caliber didn't happen often but they happened, and would end with sniffled nosebleeds and tender tissue wipes.

"Dustin's reasonable when it counts, don't worry," Will reminded, giving Mike a nudge. His grumble was some incoherent nonsense but he seemed to agree, eventually. "I really doubt he's going to ask something insanely ridiculous."

"Yeah, like footing this damn junk food bill," Lucas groused and draped an arm around Max's shoulders. There was a mild protest, a snarky comment of *didn't I just shame you, stalker* but she seemed to settle, begrudgingly content. "Bring your wallets tonight, *no one* is getting snacks until they cough up some cash towards it."

"Except me," the redhead looked smug. "I'm special."

"Uh, the hell you are –"

"Oh yeah? Someone's not –"

"If that's a threat depriving him of something sexual, *could you not* because we don't want to hear it."

"You afraid it's too kinky for your non-virgin vanilla ears?" Lucas taunted, because *sometimes* he was a dipstick and hopped onto the bandwagon with his girlfriend on giving Michael Wheeler some shit.

While being the fifth wheel at the moment wasn't all that *great*, Will seemed impressed about something and turned to El. "I think they're almost normal again," he motioned to Lucas and Max. "That's a good

thing, right? Is it gonna stick?"

She looped her arm with his comfortably, like sister and brother, and nodded. "I hope so."

"It's not like I own the tools to do it," Dustin waved his hand around to show her what he meant. They were inside the *newest* dumped and scrapped school bus that graced the junkyard. It didn't have the smell of urban decay the others held and the seats were still in decent condition. "And I figured with you and this," he tapped his finger against his temple, "that'd it'd be easier and quicker to get it all out?"

He'd been explaining *why* he requested the assistance of her brain – he wanted the setup outside to be *nice*, and cozy, and seating around a fire pit he salvaged was important. Sure, they could just sit on blankets or something but *what if we use the seats in the busses*, he had thought to himself. It was a cool idea, up until he had inspected the goods and realized it was all bolted into the flooring and it'd be a bitch and a half to pull out and arrange.

Eleven's contemplative silence made him anxious. "It's not an absolute necessity or anything, I know it's probably stupid and you know I don't want to, like, take advantage of your super powers –"

"No, I like it," she cut in, mouth pulled into a smile – something tiny and sincere, but enough for her cheek to dimple. "You're putting a lot of thought into tonight."

His face split into an excitable grin, miles wide and teeth showing. "*Duh*. Life's short, right? And we need to act our age anyway. That *does* involve going out with friends and enacting moments of somewhat irresponsible debauchery. Someone's got to take the initiative and make plans. Everyone's getting waaaay too fucking serious about post-high school plans, it's bananas."

Dustin was right. He was the glue; he kept them all together, soothed tensions between friends, reminded them of the sacrament of Party Rules and let himself be the sacrificial butt of many jokes. He was kind of their *heart*, and it made every lick of sense that he wanted to do his just to get his friends together again.

El would help. Happily.

"Hop is getting strict again," she explained quietly, eyes darting towards the foggy bus windows, almost as if she expected to see shadows lurking. Listening, watching, waiting. No one was there, of course, but the mild paranoia was probably healthy in this case. "We'll have to carry the seats out but I'll make it easy for us. Promise."

To be fair, he was *always* strict about it. He'd prefer she not use them outside of the cabin, ever, if at all possible. But she was also able to use her judgment and make her own decisions, and like she had hinted at Mike – she knew what discretion meant and when to use it.

Obviously, he didn't expect her to go balls-to-the-wall making all sorts of shit levitate when someone could stumble out of the woods and *see* it. It made sense. Caution never hurt.

Dustin took a step back against the driver's seat, giving her space to, er, *do her thing* as he watched in awe (it would never stop being *fucking awesome*, thanks). The bolts quivered and turned, metal scratching against metal, and one by one they all loosened until they were free. What would have taken him *hours* with all the stripped and worn screws took only a matter of seconds for her, and after that they carried the seats out one by one.

He grabbed one end, she the other. They weren't all that heavy, he observed, although he was pretty sure she was footing most of the weight with all that invisible strength. On their second to last trip, he saw a drop of red peek from her nose and frowned. "Hey, we can stop if you're –"

"We're almost done," she insisted. "It's okay. I...like being able to do this. Using it to help." It seemed silly to just *sit* on her powers sometimes, and if she could use it to lend a hand to – or entertain – her friends then why not? *Better than using it to kill people*, she thought cynically, although she'd never say those words.

After things were placed in the way Dustin envisioned, their hands met in the air for a triumphant high-five. "Better just relax before your boyfriend rolls up and punches me in the nuts," he advised

sheepishly, offering her tissues and a candy bar. Her nose got a little too bloody and her balance was questionable. He'd handle the rest - gathering wood for the pit, lighting it up, and unloading the old blankets from his car. "You accomplished your quest objective beyond expectations. Thanks, Jane Grey."

(A nickname in homage to the mutant she reminded him the most of. *He* thought it was clever, all right? You can't convince him otherwise, geez.)

"Jean Grey could have lived to become a god, but it was more important to her that she die a human," Eleven recited casually, unwrapping the 3 Musketeers Bar he had offered. Not her favorite, but the sugar would pep her up.

His baby blue eyes widened, thrilled. "You finished them! Yes! Fucking finally! Did you like it?"

"No," she pouted, except that was an outright lie so she retracted, sighing. "Yes. You could have warned me about the ending." It had tugged at the inner romantic in her, *okay*, she really liked the Scott and Jean relationship and their goodbyes hit her harder than anything she'd ever seen on her badly enacted soaps.

"It's not the *end* end, don't worry," he waved, tickled amused. "I don't want to fill you in with spoilers but it gets kinda weird afterwards, and she *does* come back but there's this clone and time travel, and..."

They conversed and laughed until time escaped them, until the sky's canvas blurred with wispy clouds and brushes of pastel colors. It was getting cool, the springtime air constantly coming at them in breezes. By then the lighter fuel had been dumped on the wood, a couple lit matches tossed in, birthing brighter, larger flames. It was a comfortable heat, not sweltering and overwhelming.

Soon, there was music. Soon, there were snacks. Voices clashed - innuendos and jokes, sarcasm and good-humored arguments, *always* rambunctious and loud, never-changing even if *they* had. It'd been an inevitable thing; nature taking its course, the story of life, all part of the trial and error that was known as *growing the fuck up*.

Things that once defined them as children faded; less rounded cheeks, sharper jaws, wiser eyes, innocence chipped away. Their voices deepened, bodies changing - toning up, filling out, growing pains settling, goodbye painfully awkward pubescence. Little wheels from bikes and skateboards were pushed aside for permits and licenses, paving the way to the much bigger wheels of actual cars. Part-time jobs and extracurricular responsibilities ate away their once vast freedom, their tabletop campaigns becoming scarce occurrences and nights where they binged watched favorite movies a hundred times over dwindling. Friendships outside their immediate circle formed, and sometimes pulled them in different directions.

One constant remained, and that constant was this: they always came back as a group, brought together by shared experiences those their age would never know, would never *have*. Tonight was a reminder. Proof in motion. All that physical distance that would eventually separate them meant shit, and they were all a little more assured of the fact.

"This is what he needed your brain for," Mike mused, admiring the set up from his spot next to El. They shared a bus seat, a light quilt strewn across their laps. Fire snapped and glowed. Will was sifting through an assortment of cassettes. Dustin hogged the cheese balls. Lucas ragged on him and Max had her legs sprawled across his lap as she cackled with laughter. "It's comfy."

Her face was bright in agreement, digging into the tupperware of peanut butter cookies he'd brought from home. The snacks passed among were substitute dinner and she was *ravenous*. "All Dustin's idea," she said, and then noticed the strange - almost broody - stare he pinned her with from the corner of her eye. "What? Why're you looking at me like that?"

It was El's turn to wear the funny look. He licked his thumb and swiped it right above her lip, cleaning away a faint smear of orange. *Blood residue*. "Missed a spot."

"Oh," she blinked, lifting her shoulders a little bashfully. "Thank you."

A small wind mussed her hair. He brushed a lock of it away from her face and past her ear, exposing the little twin studs piercing her lobe.

"You were careful, right?"

"No, Mike, I juggled every single bus in the air and let people take pictures."

"Don't be mean."

"I'm teasing," she smirked. Mike didn't think it was funny, really, although the kiss pressed against the corner of his lips seemed to easily pacify him. Sometimes all it took was the little things. "Promise. I just made things lighter while we carried stuff around. We talked about comics, too. Dark Phoenix."

He pulled a face. "Really? Wait, the one where she dies on the moon?" Those issues were almost *ten years old*. Usually they were engrossed in the newer stuff whenever time allowed them to indulge in a favorite pastime, but he knew that part of the X-Men timeline well. Probably too well. "It's been awhile since I've read through that part. They're kind of -"

"Depressing?"

He paused to consider. "Yeah. I guess that's the word."

In the midst of Dustin defending Steve's honor (or, really, his tardiness and lack of beer) against the absolute *grief* that was being dished out by the others, Will had gained custody of the cheese ball container and shimmied onto the edge of the vinyl seating. It sandwiched El tightly between them - more against Mike than anything - so there wasn't a peep of a complaint. "Beep beep, scoot over. What's depressing?"

"X-Men issues 128 to 138," Mike explained, stretching an arm over his girlfriend for an exchange of snacks.

The numbers clicked with Will instantly. "Oh, yeah, definitely. Man. What a throwback. Did you reread them for the hundredth time or something?"

El felt him squirm. "No, she just read it for the first time and I was just - y'know, commenting. Big character death." *Goodbyes, a sacrifice, ashes*. "Dustin's got the complete collection anyway. Holly used all my

issues as color and I had to toss them, so it's been, uh, years, come to think of it?"

In truth, he never advertised the storyline when they had introduced the girls into the world of comics. It didn't stick with Max much (her stigma in being a nerd rested in gaming) but El took a liking, fascinated about worlds where powers were common and not complete secrets. Now that Mike looked back with an *older* point of view, he could see where the avoidance was deliberate. It hit too close to home. Comics were meant to be fiction and at the age of *twelve* he was able to relate to one of the most notorious events in make-believe history.

It sucked. A lot.

She went to tickle him in an attempt to reel him from the thoughts that held him hostage. Mike jolted and whined. *Victory*. "She comes back, though. Dustin says they get married and -"

Speak of the devil, and he will glean everyone's attention by shouting bloody murder over the blare of music. Dustin jumped to his feet, waving cheese-powdered hands in the air. "See! He's here! He's just being fashionably late!"

"He's really not that fashionable, though," Max rolled her eyes all the way into her skull but *whatever*. The well-aged BMW came to a halt, the squeaky brakes finally silenced. The arrival caused them all to shift and lean to see. "Hurry up, beer fairy!"

Contrary to her words she actually really *did* like Steve. They all did. Even Mike, who eventually overcame the awkwardness of socializing with his sister's *ex-boyfriend* because a certain someone (Dustin) secretly (not so secretly?) worshipped him.

"*I'm* the one with the goods, little missy, don't be mouthing off at me," Steve huffed, circling the car to pop the trunk. Most of the beer came canned, few of it bottled. He barely changed - the hair was still too much, the women still found him *oh so dreamy*. "I would have been here earlier if the *other* little missy's father hadn't stopped me on the way over."

All heads turned to look at the 'other little missy.'

El said nothing. Her eyes blinked wide, and she slowly kept stuffing her face with the cookies until her cheeks were filled because she did *not* want to participate in the conversation. Mike seemed to perform well as her mouthpiece instead.

"Uh, the chief knows where we are, so it shouldn't be a big deal? What'd he say?"

It's not like he was under the impression they sat around discussing *Star Wars* theories on a constant basis. Hopper knew they were teenagers. He was aware they'd do teenage *things*. He didn't want to know the details. All he'd ask is that they not be idiots and respect his curfew when it came to his daughter. Nine times out of ten, they listened.

(No one will ever discuss what happened during that *one time* though.)

"Hammering the same reminders over and over like a broken record." Who else was going to get them their alcoholic requests? *Steve*. Hopper knew that too, although he hadn't flat out ever called him out on it, and it landed him the unofficial and unpaid job of babysitter. It was an awful deal. Just flat out *awful*. These assholes needed to count their goddamn lucky stars he liked them.

He hoisted the cases from his trunk to the ground, and they flocked to it like flies on horseshit. "Curfew's at midnight, no one's allowed to drive under the influence, keep the crazy shit to a zero, no hard liquor. He took my personal bottle, by the way. You're all paying me back for the casualty."

"So, basically, don't be you when you when you were our age."

"You're an ass, Sinclair."

"Guess we'll just shotgun beer for a quicker buzz," Max concluded. "Someone give me a can and hand me a knife."

Steve had to wipe the metaphorically tear from his eye, he really did. It was a competitive tie between Lucas and Max who perfected the

skill of shotgunning piss beer. Dustin usually did well but tonight was not his night, and instead there was a huge sprayed mess that dampened the front of his shirt. Will went for a bottle instead of a can, sipping his like a normal person. Mike did the same because *idiots, good god*, and Eleven fell somewhere in between all of them, always quick to chug hers down straight-faced to avoid the sticky mess the others seemed to get themselves into.

"Look, the third time's totally going to be the charm, guys –"

"Dustin, maybe you should change your shirt?"

Mike reached for a handful of cheese balls. "Will, that's just pointless, he's just going to get that wet too."

"I don't just casually carry extra shirts around with me anyway?"

"Just *keep* your shirt on, whatever you do."

"You're doing great, Henderson," Steve encouraged while nursing his own beer. "Don't let them get you down. It's practice for the Big Leagues. Messing up in front of us is okay, we're a safe space. I'll drive you home."

"Aw, dude. Steve. You're totally my favorite party member."

"Steve's a party member? Since *when*?"

"Damn, Wheeler. You hurt me, right in the heart. Just like your sister."

El choked on her second beer. Lucas laughed so hard he was practically in tears.

"Oh, come *on* –"

Will snapped his fingers. "*Barbarian*. That'd be his role."

"It's because of the bat full of nails, isn't it."

"Wait, wait." Maxine, Queen of 'Three Beers Down in under Fifteen Minutes,' flailed for attention. "Waiiiit. Guys. Time out. Stop. We

need to give Little Spoon and Big Spoon the floor here for a sec. We've been promised an explanation for yesterday's ditching."

For reasons unknown to Steve, the vibe among them shifted. "So which one is Big Spoon?"

"El. El is Big Spoon."

"*Really* now-"

"None of that's important," Eleven intervened, this time serving as a mouthpiece for Mike. He oozed anxiety and exasperation; she felt every thread of it, tightly wound. The stillness of her voice managed to settle the group.

Most of the time she was content sitting back, quiet, watching the shit show of their shenanigans unfold like she was observing a social experiment for her own amusement. And when she did speak, the consensus was that it was either important or unintentionally hilarious. Right now they were all assuming the former.

She tossed her empty beer can into the trash bag. The aim was perfect, no doubt to a little force manipulation. "Mrs. Wheeler thinks," she paused, exchanged brief looks with Mike, and then corrected herself, "um, *recently assumed* that I'm a Russian spy."

It unraveled after that.

Mike, having found his voice again, took the lead on explaining. How the conversation with his mother escalated *way too quickly*, Hopper's input and tentative plan, the alleged 'skeleton crew' going through the lab. His hands were in El's the entire time, toying, playing; an outlet for nervous energy. No one interrupted. There wasn't a peep of a wisecrack, nor were their grumbles of arguments about who was currently hoarding what snack.

An old, familiar mood blanketed the bonfire; somber, nostalgic, the promise of strange happenings thick in the air. It aged them. All that was missing were sightings of monsters and fleshy rifts that led the way into a toxic shadow world.

Knock on wood.

"Honestly," Dustin spoke first, abandoning all attempts to successfully shotgun even once tonight. His cap was off, nails scratching at his scalp beneath the intense mop of curls. "Since the issue with your mom's being addressed by adults, I just gotta circle back to the lab thing. I'm blaming the Russians. What do you think, El?"

"Are you trying to be funny?" Max frowned, not really sure *how* to participate in the discussion. Steve and Will were on a similar boat. Their involvement was primarily on the, ah, *monster* side.

Next to her, Lucas shifted. "He's not. That's part of what they *did* there. Develop ways to counter foreign intelligence, test weapons. Why wouldn't they want to see if anything's left? Especially if they heard about what happened in it. Russian spies *are* an actual threat."

They muted again. Fire crackled in the pit. Crickets sung. Eleven knew they were waiting for an answer, and all she could think about was how bleak everything had suddenly become – darkness their shroud, a fitting theme for their discussion. They should be laughing about something dumb and trivial, not contemplating *this*.

Guilt bled like an open wound, and hiding it was one of her biggest struggles. Usually, she succeeded.

"Could be an excuse," El finally said, slowly, like she was making sure the words she had chosen were correct. An arm hooked around her waist - Mike's - and she felt herself be anchored halfway into his lap. "But not impossible. There *was* someone in the lab. The agents didn't let themselves be known until a while after the fact."

"It's not like we can take their word as absolute truth, though." Mike was frustrated. He *really* doubted they'd be here without her in mind – searching, questioning. Maybe they'd known all along and were waiting for the right time to burst their happy bubble. "We also don't know what's left in that lab. *If* they left anything behind. It could have been them all along, creeping their way back in."

"We don't know that."

"We don't know otherwise, El."

She caught her tongue between her teeth, simmering. Will passed a sympathetic glance. A protective Mike was a very prickly and *stubborn* Mike, even if he meant well.

"I'm still too sober to even talk about government conspiracies and actual Russian spies," Max deadpanned, scrubbing a hand over her many-a-freckle face.

"Really? Because we've seen you guzzle those beers in record time, Ginger."

"Barely buzzed, Stevie-boy. Okay. So. They can't just *kidnap* her, right?"

"They can try." El shrugged. She felt the arm around her midsection tighten, and the point of a sharp chin plopped onto her shoulder. *Prickly, protective, stubborn boy*. "It won't end well for them."

Will shook his head. He'd known most of what they were discussing already - the perks of when your mother is dating the Chief of Police. "It's too risky for them to even try when you think about it. Look what happened when they faked my death. Look what happened when they thought they'd get away with ignoring the fact Barbara Holland *did* die. And Bob? It blew up in their faces and got them kicked out of town. They'd have to tread really, *really* lightly."

"He's right. Plus, all of us *know*." Lucas looked around at each of them, meeting their eyes. "Everything that happened stopped being their dirty little secret when we found El, and when a monster dragged Will into a *different dimension*. We're all loose ends they'd have to tie if they attempted something, and the only way to shut us up is to kill us. That'd be an idiot move for them if they're trying to stay out of the spotlight. And when they mess with one of us, we've proven that they're messing with *all* of us."

"That's a really optimistic view. I mean, the execution could have been a little better but overall, I agree."

"Thanks, Dustin. I'm always striving for your approval."

It was a good opportunity, Steve thought, to distribute the rest of the

beer. "All I know is my senior year wasn't filled with *this* much drama," he snorted, shaking his head. "*Jesus*. All right, kiddos. Listen up. You're only this age once, but if you're old enough to seriously worry about government conspiracies screwing with your lives then you're old enough to get shitfaced about it. It's called adulthood. *Which means that*, if necessary, I selflessly volunteer drop you all you drunk babies off at your respective homes."

While he couldn't guarantee their sobriety, the least he could do was guarantee their safety.

"Aw." Max stuck her bottom lip out. "You love us."

"God, stop."

"You're going to *miiiiiiiiiiiss* us," Dustin crooned.

"Not even close."

Lucas chimed in for the shits and giggles. "What *are* you going to do when we graduate? Hang out with people your own age for once?"

"Guys, do we really want to bite the hand that gets us drinks?"

"William, *my boy*. You're going places in this world."

A breath of a laugh tickled her cheek. Eleven couldn't see it, but she could hear the grin in it - because it was difficult to *not* have their spirits lifted in the presence of friends.

Because Lucas was right.

If someone or *something* messed with one of them, they messed with *all* of them.

"Are you buzzed?"

"Mmm, not really."

11:21pm. Thirty-nine minutes left before the deadline of curfew.

They were inside his car, the keys still in the ignition but the engine silent. Several yards from their parked location was the first tripwire in the line of defense that surrounded the cabin. Neither of them had taken Steve up on his generous offer. Mike wanted to be the one to bring her home, and he didn't have it in him to *chug chug chug* until he fell flat on his face (unlike Max, whose beers caught up to her all at once and with a vengeance).

El's line of thought was similar.

"Did you have fun?" she whispered, capturing his pinky with hers.

He reciprocated with a tight grip. Between them, their hands swung.

"Oh, yeah," Mike smirked. "I'm not letting Dustin forget how he almost pissed in the fire. What was Will even *saying* to you, by the way?"

"If anyone touches you, I'm gonna murder them in the face."

"That is probably the cutest death threat I've ever heard."

"He *tried* to sound tough."

Now they were smiling stupid, dopey smiles. Moonlight spilled through the windows. His skin bathed in it, white as a ghost's, but hers seemed darkened by shadow and mystery. The creative writer in him - which did exist, deep beneath the layers of scientific fact and technology fascination - thought to describe the image of her, at this very moment, as *otherworldly*.

It was a good word. It fit.

11:29pm. Thirty-one minutes left.

The tip of her pinky was the starting point of his journey through observation. He drank in the smallest details, from the chipped nail polish to her prominent knuckles, lines of ink permanently etched into her wrist like an old scar, the bracelet that she never took off. Up her sleeve-covered arms (a plaid shirt, too big for her), the space between her shoulder and neck. Rosebud lips, the spot on her cheek where her dimple hid.

Then, at last, his eyes met her curious and amused ones. The color sometimes reminded him of honeycombs.

"Take a picture, Wheeler," she chuckled, all deep and husky and somehow *so attractive*, because he was a sucker. The biggest. "They're supposed to last longer."

Mike didn't know the time, didn't know the amount of minutes left, and honestly didn't *care*. He leaned in, El met him halfway, and it was a clash of hot mouths. Beautifully messy, spectacularly needy, a fine cocktail of hormones and passion and *love* – how else to really describe it?

Maybe something like liquid fire, or electricity sizzling through their veins.

Her shirt came off first. He was *greedy*. His teeth and lips and tongue claimed the exposed canvas of her skin, leaving a trail of wet kisses and reddening nips in his wake. El's fingers were lost in that oh so grabbable hair of his, soft to touch and solid black like a starless midnight sky.

He kissed the top of her breasts, curve of her collarbone, the pulse in her neck. It was making her so *dizzy*, and his touch made her soft and gooey and god, like *pudding*. Eleven was pudding, and Mike was devouring every sweet inch of her.

She could feel his grin cut into her throat, smug like the pretty bastard he was, because he was also having a damn good time making her whimper – desperation, want, *stop teasing me*.

They knew what position worked best (her on top, straddling), the way to move to make it *real* good (which made the frame squeak and windows sweat). The luxury of privacy in an actual bed was a rare commodity, and practice and creativity had helped them master their car escapades. Maybe it wasn't traditionally romantic, but it was familiar. One of their *things*.

Their bodies snapped together as one. And the way their foreheads pressed against each other's, all affection and tenderness (despite the haze of lust), was the *I love you* they needed that very moment.

12:04am. Four minutes past curfew. They were forgiven.

El was home, safe and (surprisingly) sober. That's all Hopper cared about.

Willful ignorance was bliss.

9. Violets

"You've gotten better with your stops," Hopper commented, taking a slow drag of his cigarette and expelling the smoke out the window – right into the wind as they drove, he in the passenger's side and the his telekinetic charge at the helm. "Not so abrupt. Thinking that in two weeks you'll be ready for the road test? How's that sound?"

Anyone else her age would have responded ecstatically. Eleven, on the other hand, gave a mute nod, fingernails tapping against steering wheel. Wasn't even in tune with whatever song was currently on the radio, either, which meant she was semi-distracted. Enough to drown him out, but attentive enough to not crash them into a tree.

He shook his to-go cup of lukewarm coffee and sighed. "Is it about Mike? You literally saw him last night."

That name was always the magic word with her. Finally, her eyes flitted to him, acknowledging his existence.

"No."

And she speaks.

"Not about that."

A tradition had taken root ever since Mike achieved the status of Licensed Driver. On the weekends he couldn't join them on their trip to visit her mother, he'd stop by with breakfast, something cheap and not terribly fancy (McDonald's, mostly, because it's not like he was swimming in cash). The three of them would eat at the compact table, sip on their drinks of choice and complete crossword puzzles from the paper until it was time to load up. Most would find the sheer normalcy of it boring, but she loved it. Loved the company, loved the bits of snark exchanged between the two most important men in her life, loved feeling that nothing in the world was better than those moments.

Except things hadn't gone as planned that morning. Mike was straddled with several responsibilities, all *out of the blue*, thus foiling

tradition. Mowing the lawn, pressure washing the back of the house, dropping Holly off to a birthday party – an entirely detailed to-do list to be completed before his shift at The Hawk, courtesy of one Mrs. Wheeler.

In the scheme of things it *wasn't* a big deal, and she had spent the majority of their time on the phone assuring him midst frustrated ramblings ("Really, it's okay-" "I think she's just pissed off at dad because he hasn't even taken the lawn mower out of-" "Mike, seriously-"). The night before ended on a more than well note anyway; the proof on their skin all from their teeth and hungry lips, and the contraceptive wrapper probably lost somewhere between the seats.

(He really, really needed to clean his car out before someone found them all shoved in the crevices.)

Physical distance often made them antsy, though. They did their best to keep it to themselves, soothed by the fact that she could venture into the darkness to find him, and he'd feel her presence like a gentle static charge because by now he *knew* when she was there. Sometimes her voice would crackle through the supercomm, and other times her words would be whispered in a way he could only hear.

But, she wondered.

"You gonna tell me about what, then?"

El considered it.

"Preferably sometime this year."

Her eyes stared straight ahead at the road. She worried her lip and after a minute, quietly responded. "I don't think Mrs. Wheeler likes me."

Well, fuck. Didn't he have a bottle of some shit he'd taken from Harrington yesterday? Probably rolling somewhere under the seats, but Hop idly thought it'd go well with the rest of the shit coffee they'd procured from a drive-thru. It couldn't make it any *worse*.

"I think she's wary," he replied, not realizing how barbed those words

felt until he said them. It was probably fatherly bias that had him irrationally hate the idea that someone could ever even dislike his kid. "Did you hear something? Did she say something?"

"I think she didn't want Mike to see me this morning."

Saying that out loud sounded so *petty* that it made her wince. Was it petty that she thought it, or petty that his mother would purposefully try to wedge some space between them until she got her answers? Maybe she was overthinking, and she was being stupid, and maybe she deserved to have that itching guilt swallow her whole.

Next to her, Hopper made a sound in thought. He also tossed his cigarette bud and the empty cup out the window.

"Isn't it illegal to litter?"

Hah. *Hah*. He ignored that. "She's a parent, El. She's going by gut and what she thinks she knows. Wouldn't be surprised if this was a subtle way of her pressuring us to hurry up and clean the air. I also wouldn't be surprised if she's just a mother milking chores from her son while she's got him home, but you've got a reason to worry about it being the former."

Meaning she *wasn't* being stupid for fretting about it. She nodded, quiet, although she felt the weight of his focus.

He had more to say, or something to ask.

"Is there..." Hopper cleared his throat, trying to articulate. "It was your idea to have Joyce and I talk to her first and that's fine, she's on board with it, but is there anything you don't *want* us to tell his mom?"

"Mmm," she hummed, flicking the blinker switch with her mind. *Tick, tick, tick*. "Use your judgment. If you think it's something that I need to tell her instead, let her know that she can ask me. I did say I want to speak with her too."

"Right," he agreed. "That's reasonable."

"I try to be."

Her mouth twitched into a smile. He wore one too, deep beneath that prickly facial hair and he couldn't help but reach over and ruffle her hair - except she actually *cared* what it looked like at that age, and fought his hand with an indignant huff and swat. "God, you're all grown up."

"Mostly, yes."

"You're basically an adult."

"Uh-huh."

"A *young woman*."

Oh my god. El developed a look of disgust. "Hops. Stop. You're embarrassing me."

"I gotta while I can," Hopper chuckled throatily. "You're leaving me to play house with that pasty string bean."

Part of him wished she wouldn't. That same part wished they'd take it a little slower, that they'd wait, because he was still worried about not being there for her if something happened, or how the fuck they were going to figure out city living and finances and jobs.

The other part knew they'd figure it out.

"He's a cute pasty string bean," she countered cheekily. "When are *you* going to play house?"

"What?"

"You. Joyce. Obviously." Her eyes went so far back into her skull it was a miracle she managed to take the damn highway exit without casualties.

He shifted, rubbed his nose and looked out the window. "I'm planning to ask. Soon." Hell, he almost *had* asked, if Flo hadn't come in like her ass was set on fire - and he'd ask again, eventually, once he knew those agents were *fucking gone*. He wouldn't rest or plan jack all until they left.

But Hopper couldn't tell her that. He didn't want her to think she was mucking things up for everyone, because no matter how illogical the idea was, it wouldn't stop her from feeling it.

An eyebrow of hers rose. "You should hurry up."

"What the hell's the rush?"

"Well, for starters," El sighed, kind of dramatically. "You're not getting any younger."

Glaring, he pivoted his head to face her and noticed that pretentious smirk. "You're such a shit sometimes."

"Right? I hear I take after my dad."

She did, and Hopper was as appalled as he was proud.

Aunt Becky was nice, and for someone who finally realized that all the 'conspiracy nonsense' her sister spouted years ago was actual truth, she learned to accept the reality of it rather readily. The government really *had* abducted Jane, faked her death, and raised her in a facility where they wanted to use her against communists. Exactly like how Terry claimed.

What a fucking ride, she had thought to herself more than once.

They had also fried her sister's brain, the sick fucks, but she was more than prepared to work alongside Jim Hopper in keeping secrets to make sure things stayed safe. A relationship was built with her niece (with El, eventually, paying back the money stolen), and in turn she had a relationship with her *mother* that wasn't as limited as most would think. The past couple years had been nice. The help had been even better. It was comfortable. It was family.

So him coming into the house and frisking through every corner, hole, and surface for a routine bug check wasn't out of the ordinary. They never commented on it in case there *was* a device somewhere listening. He always came back empty-handed.

Today, the search was more thorough than usual. He was even

checking for shit *outside*. They let him at it. El went straight to what was meant to be her childhood bedroom and set her bag down.

It was soft with pink and cream undertones, similar to the one she had back home, with a cot on the side. The crib remained set up. All the bit-sized, cutesy baby-oriented things were still untouched and in place. They had discussed packing it all away one day when they were ready.

It wasn't that day any time soon.

"Just got her out of the shower," her aunt started. "She's in her bedroom in a bathrobe. Letting you know, though, she's been...off."

She pretended to look surprised. "Off?"

"Lights flickering extra hard, won't even spell things out for me on that board your boy made her for her." Becky rubbed a tired eye. "Think you can take over? I need to actually start getting ready for my date and not look homeless."

"You don't and you won't," Eleven simpered, rolling up the sleeves of her flannel shirt. It was good to see her putting herself out there, trying to *have* some kind of life that didn't always revolve around taking care of someone. "Wear the blue dress you hide in the back of your closet."

"Oh, god, I haven't worn that in *years* –"

"You'll look good in it."

"My tits don't defy gravity like they used to, Jane."

"Push-up bra?"

Becky made a face, and not in a bad way. "Maybe. I'll think about it."

"I'm just trying to help you – you know." Max would say *get laid, bitch*, but she had no intention of being that crude to her aunt.

"You're so sweet," she sarcastically remarked and opened her arms, pulling her into a hug. "Maybe one day I'll introduce him, I don't

know. I like him. The guy brings me *and* Terry flowers when he comes by. Makes me dinner, rubs my feet."

They swayed side to side, grinning at each other. "You sound happy."

"I'm getting there," Becky laughed and smoothed her hands down El's arms. "Alright, go see your mom. I'm gonna go see what your old man's up too. Maybe he found a possum under the porch or something." *Hopefully nothing.*

She left. Only two doors down was a bedroom she knew all too well – pale blue walls, accents of sunflower yellow, everything for the most part tidy because it's not like Terry Ives had it in her anymore to make a mess. Hopper usually let her do a sweep of this room after teaching her exactly what to look for, and El would get to that in a minute.

In a minute.

Sitting at the edge of the bed, freshly showered and wrapped in a bathrobe laundered one too many times that its softness was barely there, was Mama. Half-lidded eyes, a face blank like white paper, hands on her lap and dirty blonde hair damp on her shoulders. Outwardly, her condition hadn't improved much. The same words were chanted over and over, the volume barely over a whisper, and constant care remained a necessity.

But they would communicate. Sometimes she was lost in the fog of her fractured mind, and other times there would be a spark of life – they'd connect in the mental void, and she would flash images and piece together echoes of words pulled from memories (*turn around turn around*). Other times the lights would flare and dim, like she was trying to grab attention.

It had happened in Mike's presence enough that it birthed a genius idea.

"Hi, Mama," was Eleven's soft greet, knees pressed against the carpeted floor as she crouched in front of her. Even without a flicker of recognition she knew her mother recognized her and *hear* her, so she would never stop talking. "I'm going to get your hair brushed and

get you dressed in a minute, okay?"

She gathered the woman's hands into hers and brought them in for a kiss. They were cold, and her fingers were almost skeletal. "I'm going to look around your room first. I know you've been upset. It's going to be okay."

Next to her on the bed was a board. An Ouija Board, specifically, and she had *a lot* of questions about it when she had first seen one (one; why would someone make this, two; the age to summon spirits was eight, so why did you have to be *twenty one* to legally drink). Drawing inspiration from Joyce's wall once upon a night in 1983, Mike had made his creation by purchasing one, altering some Christmas lights – one bulb over each letter – routing some wires, and adding in a slot for batteries.

Instead of ghosts and the unknown speaking to them through the board, the idea was that Mama would. It was successful in the fact that it worked, although she wasn't always all that there in the head to put it to use.

(El might have cried a lot when he showed it to her, because *of course* he had the heart to do something like this for them. Of course.)

Becky had said she had been acting up, yet there was no light radiating from it.

She stood, knowing that she needed to exercise patience. They had the day together and most of tomorrow, anyway. "I have a lot to tell you," she proceeded to open the drawers and feel around for something suspicious. "I drove up here again. Hops thinks I can test for my license in a couple weeks."

On and on she went, talking about school and exams, Will's art project, Max's self-searching road trip after graduation, the junkyard. Mike's proposal that they move in together, how Indianapolis wasn't far away and it would never stop her from coming by. By then she had flipped the mattress, searched the pillowcases, checked beneath the bed and closet. All safe.

Then she went to pull the curtains to inspect them, see if there was

anything on the windowsill.

There was. But it wasn't what they had feared.

It was a tiny flowerpot. Petals such a deep purple that they were almost black. Little gold centers. Violets.

Behind her, Mama's automated words filled the air. "Breathe."

Today is a very special day.

"Sunflower."

Do you know why?

"Rainbow."

El shook her head and held the pot, just like she had once done.

"Three to the right."

Because today, we make history.

"Four to the left."

Today, we make contact.

"Four-fifty."

She could feel it again. A phantom touch, the gentle *bop* on her nose. Something in her snapped.

"Hey, kid?" Hopper's knock on the door was like thunder. *Breathe like Mama said.* "We clear in there?"

Like people, plants were living things and, like people, plants could be killed. Plants didn't bleed like humans did, didn't have fleshy organs on the inside she could make fail, yet they could die under her stare just like a person - suffocate, wilt and wither until the colors dimmed, the leaves shriveled, the petals fell. The violets met that very fate.

Coolly, she closed the curtains and put them out of sight. "We're

clear."

"Good," he replied from the other side of the door, only halfway relieved. "Because there was one in the fucking kitchen."

Couldn't say she was surprised.

In the open, aimless sea of black, he was a flutter of light.

Her venture into darkness that night was voluntary. There was calculative control over whom she saw and for how long - unlike the times she was pulled in from her sleep, where humans, non-humans, and peculiar places were seen at random (or with purpose, because there was nothing random about the window, the door). It was well past midnight, and El was wired. Wide-awake.

Mike wasn't. He was exhausted and slouchy with dark sleepy eyes that were too stubborn to close.

But without fail he waited for her, sitting in the somewhat more adult-sized fort with the supercomm cranked on. Yanking off his nametag, shrugging off his jacket, combing the beautiful insanity of his hair with his fingers. It made it even *worse* (which also meant cute), god, why did he even bother? Eleven couldn't help but smile into her thumb.

It was when he reached over to undo his shoelaces that he paused. Goosebumps dotted his arms. He looked at her – *directly* – like he could make out the outline of her silhouette.

He knew. Always.

"Creep."

She tried her hardest not to giggle, except the squeal of static from the walkie-talkie was a clear give away.

"Peeping Jane," Mike accused again, and the happiest of grins lit his tired face. "You know, it's really fitting that the female counterpart of Peeping Tom is literally *your name*."

That was when she settled next to him, the waters of the abyss rippling with her movement. He could definitely feel her now. There was static in the air, the weight of her presence familiar in all the best ways, and the invisible waves carried her voice from one plane to the next. "Guilty," he heard her say through the speaker. "You untie your shoes so seductively."

"Don't tell me you're developing a foot fetish."

Innocence was feigned. "What's that?"

Off came the sneakers, socks, *freedom*, and then he flopped back into the heap of pillows and blanket. With little intention of getting up to do exactly *jack shit*, he folded an arm behind his head. "Yeah, okay. Don't play the cute card. How'd today go?"

His parents were dead asleep upstairs. Holly, too. El had checked, just in case. This moment was theirs.

"You first," she insisted, resting on her side, most of her weight held by her elbow. Her eyes swept over him, taking in all those schmoopy, miniscule details, like the tint of red that was fresh on his peppered nose. "You're sunburnt."

Mike sighed. "Yeah. From all the shit mom had me do. Lucas had to come by and show me how to even *use* the pressure washer. Thing."

"I figured. You look wiped. What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?"

"Waaay too early."

"Mike, if you need to sleep –"

"I'm fine," he asserted, holding his free hand for her to take. She did, and he could feel the pressure of her grip. It was – well, it was pretty fucking amazing. Nothing would compare to the real thing, but he would take this over nothing during their times of separation. "Promise, promise, promise. It's been a long day and the best part of it is this, El. Let me have it."

Hard to deny a request like that. "Okay," she exhaled. "Chores got you

crispy, then. Just means more freckles for you. And work?"

"Man, busy. But you know, typical Saturday night at the movies and – oh, god, the amount of people deep throating tongues in the back seats tonight was insane," he groaned. "This chick flick's out? *Heathers*. The main actress looks way too much like Will's mom but every guy took their girlfriend to see it."

"Aw. That is one I want to see."

"Are you asking to go?"

"I *am* capable of going to the movies by myself."

"Blasphemous. Obviously you'll need me to french you in the back of the theatre."

"Mm," El smirked, though it wasn't like he could see. "You're judgey for someone who was complaining about the very thing you want to do."

"Fine. We'll compromise. How about during the trailers and end credits?"

"Interesting proposal. I'll have to think about it."

His thumb stroked what seemed to be open air, but he knew it was her hand. "I appreciate the consideration," Mike laughed a little. "Your turn."

After that, he didn't hear her voice from the speaker. She was relying on the invisible tether between them instead. "It's been..."

"A day?"

"Yes," she affirmed. "Move onto your side?"

He did. Instantly, there was the sensation of the unseen force that she was tangled up in him. "Better?"

She craved his body heat. Craved the way his real skin felt as she nosed his Adam's apple (he felt something akin to a tickle). Craved

his smell, too, which was probably all sweet candy and buttery popcorn from his shift. This would have to do. "Much."

Not a lie. It was all she could get.

"Good. Now, c'mon. Talk to me."

"Hops found a bug in their kitchen. Only one. Smashed it." There was a second, even a third search. Just in case. "And I'm pretty sure Aunt Becky's sort-of-boyfriend is an agent or spy or...something."

"What?!"

"Shhhh!"

Mike hissed. "Don't *shhhh* me, you just told me your aunt's sleeping with the enemy!" His body would have shot up like a rocket if her hold hadn't been so tight, even in some kind of different dimension. "I already made sure *we* weren't bugged. The guys and I do a routine check out of habit now. Everywhere. Cars, houses. No one's listening. I don't need to shush."

"You were loud, Mike. I was trying to make sure you quiet down so you don't wake anyone up."

His distress quelled, realizing that it was a sensible point to make. "Sorry."

"I'd kiss you to shut you up, but I can't."

"Yeah, that'd be nice right now." His face creased with thoughtful concern. It wasn't fair that he couldn't see her right then; she always said a lot more with her eyes than her words. "What's the evidence against the almost-boyfriend?"

That was the thing. Hard evidence didn't *exist*. Speculation, damning coincidence and gut instinct were all she had. On the other side, she was wincing sheepishly. "Nothing concrete."

"Okay. Re-phrasing. Why do you *think* he's...whatever you think he is?"

"According to Becky he comes by a lot," she explained and immediately realized that wasn't *exactly* a definite cause of suspicion. *Good job at sounding stupid.* "No one really goes over there to begin with. And he brings by flowers -"

"El, flowers don't -"

"You don't understand," El cut him off, frustrated. "He brings Mama flowers too. Violets. Small ones. Not just once, but *every time* he comes to see Aunt Becky." There were more around the house - another in the living room, two in the kitchen. They were desiccated seconds after she took notice. "Like the one I got before I made contact. With the Demogorgon. He brought it to me, as a present."

He. Contact. Demogorgon.

It was all disjointed information, but Mike knew how to re-arrange it in his head – piece it together into a larger picture, process, understand. He didn't like the conclusion he reached. "I get it," he murmured. "Too specific to be chance."

"Yes," she breathed with relief.

"You think it's like – like a message?"

"I don't know. It could be."

"And, uh, to confirm, it's not *him* your aunt's not..." he trailed off, hoping he didn't have to say the words because he might vomit them out instead.

"Becky is not dating Brenner."

There was *so much* to unpack there, like fuck did he know where to begin. *Brenner* wasn't part of her vocabulary. It had always been a guilty *Papa*, the title holding a mixed bag of misdirected loyalty, confusion, concealed trauma. Because in the end, bullshit about monsters and government secrecies aside, she'd been a little girl abused by a man whose love came at a heavy price. Mike couldn't pretend know what it was like for her – couldn't even begin to fathom – but he knew it was more important to attempt empathy than sympathy.

Thing was, Eleven was also a bit of an enigma. She was fearless yet fragile, clever but naïve. She felt strongly while sometimes not expressing anything at all. She preferred simple things while being anything but. She could acknowledge the fact that the man was literally *the* bad man in her life; that everything he did was horrible and manipulative and every other relevant synonym.

But there was a lingering connection there, hanging by a steely thread. Mike wished he could sever it for her.

"So you're acknowledging it. That he's alive."

"I've always known."

"You never really –"

"Live and let live," she lamented, her nails sweeping along the line of his tensed jaw. His face was all sharp edges and angles, the bottom half like sandpaper from the facial hair he refused to grow. She saw the unease, the troubled haze over his eyes, how his throat moved when he attempted to swallow the dread. "I did. I tried. But if he's sending someone to seduce my aunt and bring flowers to the woman he brain damaged, then I have to find him. I *will* find him."

And El would handle it. She would handle *him*.

A/N: okay, sooooo - obviously, the martin brenner tag in this fic is going to FINALLY BE RELEVANT and a fair warning, he's not going to be written as a 100% villain (he's also not really the main one tbh) and there's going to be a lot of exploration when it comes to the connection victim of abuse can have with her abuser. doesn't mean he won't be an assbag, but i do find the character to be a lot more complex than just giving him the title of mad scientist. he's really just the tip of the iceberg, tho.

anyway, as always, thanks for reading :D

10. Infiltrated

From nose to chin, she was caked in blood. *Too long*, she thought to herself. *Too much*.

El didn't care. Not really.

Held between two fingers was a stolen cigarette, the embers brightening and eating away the bleach-white paper as she took a drag. The window was open. One leg outside, one leg inside, with her head rolled back against the frame. Mike's shirt clung loosely with a bit of red spotting the front. Her hair, oddly, fell flat; the curls had become loose waves, a chestnut veil over her small shoulders.

It was a lightless, soundless night. The moon hidden, the sight of stars fogged by clouds, and all the nocturnal insects fell mute. Dead, quiet, lonely. Lukewarm air, a humid breeze that made skin sticky.

Becky wasn't home yet.

Don't be so surprised, El punished herself, disgusted. *You encouraged this*.

Encouraged her to have fun, stay out the night, live a little and yet she was (most likely) bedding a cockroach, and how was she supposed to even tell her that? Break her happy bubble, her heart? She had wanted to, but the words wouldn't form and then it was too late. In her pretty cobalt ensemble - complete with that damn push-up bra - she had left with an overnight bag *just in case*.

You didn't know until it was too late, she rationalized. It felt like an excuse, and it didn't make her feel better.

The thought made her inhale that much harder. Smoke filled her lungs the way guilt filled her heart. But she had checked on her aunt and caught a glimpse of the man working his charm (he looked harmless, normal, although El would be watching him closely) and for now, she was fine. Safe.

Knowing that, she had proceeded.

Part of her always wondered if it was her mind that shaped the perception of this place.

Water and darkness. That had been what they had submerged her into, several times, over and over until she gave them results - and it was water and darkness that she always came to, infinite and familiar and terrifying. Pulling herself into that limbo between dimensions was now second nature, but questions about the *how* and *what does this mean* came with age. Questions she didn't have answers to.

(There were few souls who *did* have them, she figured, but she doubted they'd be willing to offer them for free.)

Mama's words hit her again. *Breathe.*

El closed her eyes and did that very thing. She breathed.

Breathed through her nose and out the mouth as she allowed herself to remember. *Contact*, with the way his cold hands cupped her cheeks the last night she saw him, how the word *home* came from his lips like one existed for just the two of them. *Make you better*, as if she was ill and he was there to play doctor and fix it for her. *Eleven*, because she was always just a number and needed it permanently put on her flesh so she could never, ever forget.

Her eyes opened. She wasn't alone. In truth, miles and miles separated them. In here, the difference was several feet. Several feet much too close.

Bone-chilling eyes, like blue ice. Hair the color of pure snow - matching his medical coat - and impeccably groomed. *Always*. Sharp nose, strange lines that she assumed were wrinkles deeper than she remembered. Around his neck was a stethoscope, and the high counter he hovered over had a bright, large logo that spelt out his location. Hawkins General Hospital. *Close. Too close.*

She bit back what would have been a scream.

(A small part of her was still wearing that hospital gown, hair shaved down to the scalp, nodes sticking to her head, and she was barefoot and curled in a cold, cold chair wondering what she did wrong and -)

Breathe. "No more," she declared out loud, the words equal to glass shards shredding her throat but she had said them to a monster once before, and she needed to say it to *this* one. "No more."

Almost as if her voice reached him, he looked towards her direction, suspicious and with unease. Those were words she would have never associated with him before.

Then, a thought occurred to her, one that brought a sense of bleak amusement.

For once, it was him being observed. It was *him* under scrutiny, helpless, as she circled around him like a wolf preying on sheep. Part of her wished the force of her mere presence would suffocate him dead, just as she suffocated the tiny, itty-bitsy part of her that felt even a flicker of relief that he was alive. Good, innocent people had died – Benny, Barb, Bob – yet he survived.

And from what she was seeing now he hadn't escaped the encounter unscathed. As she took a closer step, he went back to his paperwork, pen leisurely moving against the form, and that was when she knew for sure: those deep lines in his face weren't wrinkles.

They were scars. As if claws, decent-sized ones, had been dragged down the left side of his face and neck.

It got you, she realized. *The demogorgon.*

Not all of him, no, but definitely some of him. Enough of him. He wouldn't be able to forget even if he wanted to.

Once his task was completed and exchanged pleasantries with a receptionist – that smile looked so endearing, although she knew there was no mirth to it – he carried on down a corridor. El knew she had to tread carefully. Pushing on too hard would cause the lights to act up and she could *feel* the frequency of radio waves.

Her steps across the black waters were cautious, similar to if she was maneuvering on terrain ridden with hidden landmines. An office is what she followed him into. There was a desk in the middle of nothingness with folders neatly stacked to the side, a single picture

frame lying face down, and a plaque carved with *DR. MARTIN BRENNER, MD* in front.

What was the point of him even working here? A cover? The role of doctor for the general *public* didn't fit. It felt like something distinctly beneath him, but she imagined that once upon a time, years before her, he began in a similar place. Maybe he wasn't such a shit person back then. Maybe he was.

Maybe it didn't matter.

Brenner sunk into his seat and then, at that very moment, that illusion of rigid perfection shattered. Droopy eyelids, a wrecked posture, and his hands reached towards his neck in yearning to loosen the knot of his tie. He didn't. Instead he scrubbed it over his marred face, sighing like the world's problems were weighing heavily on his sweeping shoulders. He looked weary and weak and for a moment, nearly *human*.

Nearly.

El continued to watch. He continued to do nothing of absolute interest. Work more, she guessed, as he sifted through the medical records on his desk. She peeked and discovered they held nothing spectacular. No juicy government plot, not even a little bit of information of what he was *doing* here. They were *actual* records of *actual* patients; none that were considered test subjects for government purposes.

Shortly after, he was called into the emergency room. His trajectory took him straight towards her – like he saw her, was *coming* for her – and she went rigid, wondering, *do you know I'm here?*

Except they never collided. He became nothing but smoke and cold air, leaving her alone in the dark. Just like he used to.

Michael Wheeler was having a *real* bad case of The Mondays.

It all started when he overslept (for once, grateful he wasn't picking El up that morning) and carried on when he stubbed his *fucking toe*

against the dresser. After he yelped, swore to all the colors of the rainbow and hopped the pain away, he clumsily stumbled (okay, he tripped) into the bathroom. Halfway into his rushed morning routine was he realized he'd been using the wrong toothbrush (his father's) because *fuck his life*. He gagged, a lot, and then skipped shaving the beginnings of facial hair scruffing along his jaw. With the rate he was going he'd cut his face up to the point of grotesque disfigurement.

Breakfast wasn't even going to be attempted - and, alright, there might have been a part of him that *wanted* to avoid his mother - but he was delayed at the warning sound of her voice as he went to grab his keys. "Michael!" He cringed. "Fix yourself. Your shirt's on backwards."

Taking the second to inspect himself, Mike realized she was abso-fucking-lutely correct. "Goddamnit."

"*Language.*"

He scowled, tucking his arms into his shirt to make it face the *right* away. "I'm not ten."

"Your sister almost is," Karen countered after a sip of coffee. Holly was, thankfully, too distracted by the maze behind her cereal box to care. "Don't rush out there, be careful driving and—"

"I know, love you, bye!"

"—fix your hair!"

Fix my what?

All three traffic lights between home and school were red and, of *course*, took forever to change. By the time he arrived the good parking spots had been snatched, the precious time before homeroom spent socializing with his friends *gone*, and he couldn't even spare the luxury to stop by his locker.

Classes were luckily uneventful. Same shit, different day. Preparing for finals, cementing GPAs, and some of his peers remained anxious about university letters that had yet reached the mailbox. Mike couldn't bring himself to relate like he used to. Considering the

course his life had taken, all of it seemed stupidly trivial.

He saw his first familiar soul at the beginning of third period. Taking his usual seat beside him, Dustin did his buddy a solid: he handed Mike a comb. "You need this more than I do."

"It's not that bad," he huffed in protest.

"Yes, Mike," Dustin answered with a kind of severity that came with diagnosing terminal illness, or asswarts. "It really is *that bad*. It looks like you either just rolled out of bed or got laid. You know, sex hair."

"How do you know what my *sex hair* even looks – actually, never mind." God, that was *not* a conversation he wanted to have. Mike dutifully groomed himself to avoid further commentary and, after the condition of the mop on his head received the Henderson Seal of Approval (Steve was the worst influence), he handed back the comb. "Have you seen El?"

Their voices quieted once the bell rung, AP Biology II beginning.

"Yep, the chief dropped her off with Will this morning," whispered his curly-haired friend, flipping open his textbook. Dustin then peered at him sympathetically. "Heard you have a big day Thursday."

Mike gulped down air and stared straight ahead. News traveled fast. "Yeah," he confirmed. "We do."

Frustration spiked again after fifth period, right before lunch.

One, he didn't even *bring* lunch. Two, he didn't bring money *for* lunch. Three, his locker door was jammed in a sense that would require several injections of steroids to *unjam*. The sight of him struggling must have been hilarious (hence the pompous snickers passing by behind him, har har) and he was seconds away from giving up if it hadn't been for the last attempt.

It opened, and not because of him. A magnetic pull had done the trick. Instantly, he bristled.

"Don't do that!" Mike snapped, and regretted the moment the words escaped his big fat mouth. So much that he slammed his forehead

against the closed locker next to him and *sighed*, because he was the definition of *idiot*. "I didn't mean – you know you can't –"

"I know," came El's response, gentle and firm like the grip she suddenly had on his elbow. She wore a hand-me-down pink dress and tattered boots, her hair held loosely back. Simple. Pretty. *Always more than pretty, actually*. "It wasn't obvious."

"Still," he sighed again, and didn't even bother contributing to whatever point he was trying to make. He dropped his bag, pressed his spine against the row of lockers and tugged her into his arms. It occurred to Mike it'd been since *Friday* that he kissed her, so he did that very thing.

He kissed her, pouring the emotions of a sincere apology into it. "I should have started with 'hey,' so..."

That was when she smiled. "Hey."

"Hey," he smiled back, almost forgetting what had all made his day swirl down the shitter.

"Bad morning?"

Mike knocked his head back. "One of the worst."

Eleven nodded, squeezing her arms around his midsection. He never needed to say much for her to understand. Somehow she always did, and always seemed to guess what he needed the most. "Library?"

It was the go-to place of escape for quiet time. Their friends would crack jokes about how it was an excuse for them to make out somewhere – and while it was one of the most vacant places during lunch period, they actually did very little of the accused making out. Most of the time they sat in silence, just *being*, without the pressure of social interaction, usually for her sake. School was an obligation she never grew to like and the lack of patience with others her age was a constant test of patience. The library's atmosphere was at least calming, and Mike would often keep her company without being intrusive.

It was therapeutic in its own way. It worked. It was perfect. But he

was the one that needed it today. Somewhere quiet that was something them. "You wouldn't mind?"

She shook her head, taking the smallest of steps back. Like hell he'd let her go too far yet. "I'll go get something to eat and meet you. Did you bring lunch?"

Mike's wince was sheepish. "Bad morning."

"It's okay. I can buy us bagels."

"Bagels are perfect," he exhaled blissfully and *just like* that, his mouth was on hers again – this time he reveled in the taste of cherry chapstick, the softness of her lips. Someone actually yelled in their direction to 'GET A ROOM!' and boy, did his middle finger fly up high as a kite.

It was only seconds before El eased his hand back down, the breath of her giggle tickling his face. "I'll meet you over there in ten, okay? Please behave while I'm gone."

"Only because you said please," he mumbled, but there was a secret smile in his words. He was definitely in a *mood*. Grouchy. Broody. Mike felt somewhat better seeing her, but everything about him remained tightly wound. "If you see the everyone, just..."

"Hey," she started, hooking a finger into the belt loop of his jeans. Caramel eyes, outlined in smoky black, bore into his determinedly. "They'll understand, Mike. They know."

His head nodded, more to reassure himself than anything. "Right." *They do. They did.*

Slowly, she separated from him. "Bagels."

And, reluctantly, he let her go. "Bagels."

The exchange of books from backpack to locker was accomplished with much less animosity than anticipated. After yanking the zipper up and hoisting a strap onto his shoulder, he traversed through the halls. The crowd had thinned out, making his trek a solitary one.

Heard you have a big day Thursday.

Mike frowned, fisting his hands into his jean pockets.

No shit I do.

Because on Thursday, Karen Wheeler would know everything.

The truth behind every little lie he'd been force to tell, every bullshit story he had no choice but to weave, every gritty detail about how he and Nancy's lives had been threatened by more than military personnel in pressed suits. She'd know the truth behind Will's disappearance, Barb's death, what *really* happened to Bob Newby and Benny Hammond, and she would know the truth about El. All of it.

But she'd also know her son wasn't involved with some dangerous Soviet spy, and that the girl that had hid in his basement had saved them - saved *him* - more than once. And his mother would then maybe, hopefully, finally realize that the girl wouldn't be going anywhere.

Hopper's visit on Sunday had been a surprise. He'd come alone, requesting to speak to his mother only. His stay was brief - all he knew was that they set a time and a place, then left. If things hadn't felt awkward in his household before, they definitely did now; a smothering tension pervading, from the fragility of his parents' marriage to the secrets threatening to burst from the seams.

He had called Nancy that night, although their conversation didn't last long. They knew they couldn't exactly *talk* what they wanted to talk about, but she tried to be the 'reassuring big sister' from a distance. It almost would have worked if it weren't for the fact that he could *tell* she was, internally, freaking out. "I'm sorry I'm not there," she had said to him.

Any last minute travel arrangements from New York to Indiana weren't going to be financially realistic. Mike wouldn't hold it against her.

"Excuse me, mister."

He blinked up. It wasn't a voice he recognized as he entered the

library, on his way past the front desk.

"You're going to need to sign it. Right here."

Definitely *not* Mrs. Bennett, the ancient librarian Hawkins High had since Jim Hopper's own (terrifying) youth. In her place was a middle-aged woman giving off the vibe of 'strict nun' that he'd never seen before, tapping a sharp finger on a clipboard.

"Homeroom number, name, and time."

Who the hell even are you - "Uh, okay." He took the pen, scribbling sloppily. "Since when do we do this, though?"

"Since me," she replied curtly. "Bennett took an early retirement."

Mike assessed her with blatant distrust, and she seemed to do the same in return.

"Riiiiight."

Hold your tongue, Wheeler. You can still get detention as a senior.

Whoever the new Not-Mrs-Bennett was started to look moderately offended. His face must be doing that *thing* again, where he was conveying every single wiseass insult known to mankind through expression alone. It was a talent. Truly. One he wasn't apologizing for.

She could glare a hole into the back of his skull all she wanted as he walked off.

Their spot in the back (away from the glower of Piss Pants over there) was vacant, his for the taking and his for the searching. Mike's hands roamed everywhere; the underside of the table, chairs, underneath the chairs. Some books were opened and held upside down to see if something, *anything* fell out.

A penny did. Some stale crumbs of a sandwich too. Ah, well. Never hurt to keep checking.

"We have a new librarian?"

Her approach was quiet, like an apparition materializing from nothing. She drew his gaze and he noticed the mildly annoyed pucker of her brows. "Apparently," Mike responded, closing what must have been the tenth novel investigated before shelving it.

El settled at the table and started to – very carefully, as if the noise would glean unwanted attention – peel the clear wrap from the bagels. "That's funny." *It's not.* "There's a new janitor too."

He could read between the lines.

The silence between them wasn't uncomfortable, yet they sat together, wary of their surroundings. He pulled the pocket-sized packets of cream cheese from her bag and the water bottle for them to split. A notebook was splayed out in front of him, a book in front of her - they would pretend to scan the letters of the pages as they ate, but that was the farthest thing from the truth.

Our stupid high school's been infiltrated, hasn't it?

Maybe. She flipped to the next chapter, unperturbed. *It'll be okay.*

An eyebrow of his arched in question. Her hand slipped under the table to cup his knee. The timing was perfect. It had just begun to bounce, irate. *How are you so sure?*

Mike expected her to at least be somewhat out of sorts. Their conversation Saturday night had been intense, but here she was - collected, composed, an eerie manifestation of the calm before the storm.

She pushed her free fingers through her hair, pulling it from the scrunchy. *I don't know,* El shrugged, meeting his eyes. *But we're good at figuring it out how to make it okay, right?*

They were. Truth be told, it was what kept her going too.

"I have something to show you," El voiced, and he imagined it couldn't have been anything that'd give him premature grey hairs if she was saying it out loud. His stomach did a flip and tumble anyway. "I don't know if you heard, but..." A folded flyer was taken out. "Prom theme was announced."

I've Had The Time of My Life. Dirty Dancing. He looked surprised.

"You forgot about prom, didn't you?"

"Actually," Mike snorted a laugh, taking the paper from her to look over. It was still several weeks away, but it was being hosted at some fancy-shmancy hotel venue at the next town over (you know, somewhere with actual civilization) and ticket sales would be coming up soon. "Yeah."

"I figured," she smirked with an elbow on the table and cheek in her palm. *It's because you worry too much*. "I thought about asking you to be my date and taking your virginity."

"You did that *last* prom." It was a total cliché, and Michael always had made fun of clichés, but let's say he had really, *really* enjoyed that particular cliché.

"Exactly." El beamed. "Guaranteed good times."

He was grinning now, cute and crooked and dare she almost say carefree? It wouldn't last long, but for the first time that day he focused on something else besides home, the chaos in it, and the spying eyes. "Gonna wear a dress that's actually easy to take off this year?"

She pouted. "I *liked* that dress."

"It was a good dress," he agreed and squeezed his eyes somewhat. "But it was definitely better off you."

Her hands dove to attack his sides and he jumped, legs hitting the table with an abrupt guffaw because she was *attacking* him. With tickles, technically, but it was an attack nonetheless and Mike wrestled for her wrists.

"Oh, sorry I don't make things *easy* for you –"

"That was a compliment!" he snickered back in the most hushed volume he could manage, except it wasn't quiet at all and they were going to be in deep, deep shit if they kept this up. "Shhhh! It's my turn to *shhh* you!"

Eleven's wrists were successfully captured, although she wouldn't relent – there was some twisting, and shoving, with a meager attempt at keeping the noise down. "Don't you shhh—"

"Both of you need to *shhh!*" bellowed the voice of Not-Mrs-Bennett, skirting around one of the many bookcases to reveal herself. They shushed, sure, but neither of them held even drop of sheepish guilt most did in their predicament. "It's a library. Get out if you're going to make noise."

Her wrists still in his hands, Mike dropped his eyes to his girlfriend. *How long do you think she's been there?*

Probably too long, she projected evenly.

Not-Mrs-Bennett's attention lingered on them for a minute. Presumably satisfied with their begrudging compliance, she eventually resumed what she had (supposedly) been doing several feet from them – returning checked out titles to their spots.

His happy high nosedived back into their reality. Unpredictable, uncertain, unstable. "I don't even know what her name is."

"Doesn't matter," El murmured, attending to her half-eaten bagel with feigned interest. The next words that came, he could have sworn she had thought them instead of having *said* them. But those were her lips boldly moving and her voice boldly speaking. "She's just lucky I didn't drop a shelf on her."

"Jane." *El*.

"I didn't."

Do you plan to?

She eyed him, and made no promises.

A/N: this was kind of a tough chapter to write, because the sleeping dragon inside of el has been officially poked? but she's also a traumatized girl so there's a lot to sort out there, yeah

meanwhile mike tries to keep it together. :(it becomes a bittersweet angst train from here, honk honk. they try to act their age but, you know, life.

thank you to all who continue to read and comment to my nonsense, and a special thanks to EvieSmallwood and Hannahberrie for including this dribble of mine into a beautiful aesthetic over on the land of tumblr because wow that was gorgeous and i can't get over it.

11. Lukewarm to Subzero

That night, Jim Hopper realized something: he really needed to fucking exercise more.

Maybe smoke less, too, because *fuck* was he out of breath on the trek uphill - through the throng of blooming trees, twigs scratching at his face, branches cracking into halves beneath the weight of his steps. If they'd meant to approach discreetly in some ambush attempt, he'd call it an absolute goddamn failure with sound of them pummeling through nature.

His daughter, a slender silhouette of a shadow not far from him, handled it with a little more grace. Shouldn't be too surprising, since according to her she'd been sneaking out to this very spot almost *every goddamn night* for a month.

Anger stemming from the boiling pool of fatherly concern had been the knee-jerk reaction, but he learned the hard way that a clash of tempers got them nowhere.

(Didn't mean that they *never* fought. He was a hothead, and as much as she denied it she was his pea in a pod in that regard. It happened. Shit levitated and broke, he yelled; they'd make amends and move on. Wash, rinse, repeat.)

"Here," El spoke softly, the nightly gust carrying the whisper to his ears. At the top of the mound was a small clearing and the perfect view - a prison of nightmares, the once home of a literal hell mouth.

Last week it contained one light, and now it had several. If she concentrated - truly focused, honing in on it alone - she could feel the electric currents humming, power surging and bringing the laboratory back to life, like it was its own all-consuming monster.

Hopper wiped his damp brow.

"Here," he echoed.

She nodded, lowering to sit on the log for front-row seating. "Right

here. Just sat and watched."

I should have looked. I should have seen who was in there. I should have opened that door.

And yet she let the fear cripple her as if she were a child again, thrown inside a tight and cold room for punishment, deprived of socialization, of sunlight, of warmth, of affection. That fear hadn't been there for the past few years because she had *all* of that, and then some – but it was ingrained in every strand in her DNA, dormant, until it re-awakened with a vengeance.

He joined her on the log. "Sat here and watched," Hopper repeated. "With my cigarettes."

It was a hunch he had. The deep frown and uncomfortable change in her posture confirmed it.

"You think I wouldn't notice?"

"I hoped you wouldn't," she sighed, wrapping her arms around herself and leaning into her knees.

Nostalgically, he hadn't been much older than her when he began. Still wasn't a habit he'd want her to have. "You need to stop before it becomes a bitch to kick," he warned. "You hear me?"

Eleven sometimes hated it when he was right. "Yes."

"Good."

"You should follow your own advice some day."

Hopper often hated it when she was right. "Some day."

"Soon," she insisted, gathering the courage to stare at him straight in the eyes.

Incoherent vulgarities were grumbled. "I'll work on it," he dismissed, and while it wasn't an outright promise it was the closest one she'd get to the topic. "Your boyfriend's working on making sure your friends keep their mouths shut around the school?"

The thought of that school crawling with covert operatives made his hackles rise. Every turn he made to dig deeper, he was blocked. The mayor was hands-on-deck in assisting the The People's Government to keep the supposed skeleton crew scouring the laboratory a secret (there was political gain in there somehow, the Chief could smell it), and he couldn't peer into staff files at the school without a legitimate warrant unless he wanted to glean attention.

Hopper couldn't *stand* the feeling of having everything close in on them, adding so much pressure that they could hardly breathe. *What happens when all the oxygen's gone?*

(He dabbled in the idea of taking her and running, don't think it didn't cross his mind - but they could only run so far, and leaving all those who knew *too much* behind and at the mercy of the corrupt wasn't an option for either of them.)

El shattered his thoughts. "They'll be discrete. It's not their first time."

"It's not," he agreed, the sheer reminder of kids wrapped up in this kind of mess enough to send him spiraling down the bottom of a bottle. "What's the scoop on Becky's guy?"

He heard her take a deep breath and watched her eyes fall shut. How she'd gone from needing absolute darkness and sensory deprivation to a blindfold and television static, to *this* - a skill as natural as inflating your lungs with oxygen - constantly struck him with awe.

Awe, and cynicism. If he had control of anything he'd never want her to use her powers. He'd never want them to grow, and she would never become the weapon they wanted her to be. She would be useless to them, unworthy of their interest. Maybe then she would find peace.

Except that was a scenario existing only in a perfect world, and perfect worlds *didn't* exist. They were saddled with ugly dimensions and rotten people, and in their world she *had* to learn how to control her powers to hide them - in their world blood peeked from her nose as her consciousness transcended elsewhere, becoming the perfect spy for the world to exploit.

Minutes passed. Several of them. El was inanimate aside from her even breaths and the occasional twitch of her brow, and he internally stressed about the toll it was taking on her body. Usually this didn't make her face leak heavily like a macabre faucet, but he would never *not* be weary of what kind of hell it was wreaking on the brain at every use.

"Don't overdo it," he griped worriedly.

"Mmhm."

"I'm serious, kid –"

"Stop talking."

Don't think you can't still get grounded. Although tempted to voice it, the will to keep his mouth shut – *stop stalking* , as she so kindly put it – prevailed and he was forced to practice the fine art of patience.

Hopper found it tortuous.

And ready to call it quits when the blood trickled past her upper lip, headed down towards her chin. That was when her eyes opened, slowly, like she was waking from a cloudy dream.

"Violets were delivered to his door earlier," she started, reaching to swipe at the warm wetness of her face dazedly – except it was her father that had taken over, cleaning her up at the expense of his sleeve. "With a note. Instructions, maybe? He isn't doing anything suspicious now. He acts...normal."

"Could be that he's just getting ordered to play pretend and deliver errands," he contemplated and examined her closely. Her cheeks still had color. *Good.* "Information tends to be at a 'need to know' basis with them. They'll be given the dumbest of orders and they're obliged to do them without question. Best damn liars in the country."

"And Becky?" An unbridled fury (and guilt, *this is all my fault*) sparked in her eyes. "This is going to *hurt* her."

Maybe one day I'll introduce him.

I like him.

Makes me dinner, rubs my feet.

"It is," Hopper agreed bitterly. "But she's smart, and she'll listen. I'll handle your aunt."

El looked towards the laboratory again. "People are in there," she swallowed thickly. "I can –"

He sighed, dragging a hand down his face. "Stop it. You're not omniscient. You're not all seeing or all knowing and you can't watch them of every second of every day. It's not good for you."

Her eyes narrowed in defiance. "I'll live. I can figure out what they're really doing. Their patterns."

"That's what you've been doing with him, isn't it?"

She fell silent, mouth pressed into a flat line.

"Figuring out his pattern," he went on, anvils of dread weighing heavy in his gut. "I know you know where he is, El. You can't just handle him on your own. You're out of your goddamn mind if you think I'd *let* you."

(Hopper read the books, all about child abuse and the crippling control an abuser could have over their victim and the fucker was the subject of so many of her *nightmares* ; sinister menace and twisted depictions of love, he wasn't going to let his daughter even close to -)

"I know monsters," she quietly began, gaze unmoving. Blood trickled her nose again. Her powers weren't even in use anymore - it was as if the pipes in her brain were cracked, all part of an imperfect and broken system. The last couple days of constantly exercising them had taken toll. Finding faces she knew was easy; finding strangers she'd never *seen* was difficult, sometimes outright impossible, but it wouldn't keep her from trying. "People have pointed guns at me. They're not alive anymore. I fought the Demogorgon and won. I fought the Demodogs, and I won. I went up against the Mind Flyer and even if I didn't kill it, I pushed it back. I closed the gate. I won that battle, too."

She opened her palm and caught a drop of red. It bloomed against her skin like a small flower.

He didn't need her to say it out loud - that the man who raised her (if one could call delegated orders of abuse as *raising*) was also a monster, that she needed to face the person who robbed her of any chance at a childhood and of a normal family because what if she couldn't *heal* otherwise? There was a wide, gaping hole in her heart that Hopper couldn't fix. That *Mike* couldn't fix.

"Except there's a difference," he groused with severity, the next sequence of words tasting of bile. "Those monsters didn't raise you to love them. *This* one did. Facing him isn't going to be easy."

Her head turned slightly, peering at him. "I can do it."

That was it. *I can do it*. He'd heard those words before. Hopper stared her down, conflicted; she stared back, face stained and begging. Deep down, he knew he couldn't stop her even if he tried. He knew what she was seeking from him. Support. Approval. Not necessarily *permission*.

"Let me talk with him," was how he countered, attempting to grasp at anything – everything – he could to keep her as far away from that bastard as he could.

El wouldn't have it. "I think he wants me to go to him, Hop. The violets. The people watching. It's bait."

"No shit it's bait," her father snarled. "So we meet this halfway."

A single brow of hers arched. "What?"

"You're not doing this behind my back." That was explicitly *not* a request. It was a crystal-clear statement. His kid could be irrationally stubborn and clever, and had it in her to do as she damn well pleased even if she was met with resistance. Last thing he wanted her to do was go rogue. "You don't do this *alone* unless you want to make your boyfriend lose his shit and kill me from a heart attack. You get me?"

"I want Mike to keep his shit," she replied after a minute, "and I think you're more likely to die from your red meat consumption, or

smoking."

"You're not funny."

"I am," El clapped back and reached for his hand. "And I...get you."

Progress was what he was calling her cooperation. Rarely was she all that forthcoming when it came to certain topics, and yet their talk reached a conclusion a thousand times more reasonable than her throwing a phonebook across the living room and shutting down.

Hopper squeezed her fingers, realizing she felt just as small in his grasp as she was when they faced the gate and the monster beyond the veil. "Yeah," he exhaled. "You better, kid. You better."

Blood swirled down the drain, streaks of orange-red, right from her face.

Too long, again. Too much, *again* . But she had to – she tried to *see* , follow their steps into the darkness and listen. Hopper kept saying it wouldn't be easy. They were too smart; too dedicated to their covert operations that watching the watchers wouldn't be as simple as she thought it would.

Once again, he was right. She wasn't omniscient.

Eleven had visited Mama for a sign but the clarity wasn't there. The one light inside the laboratory turned into many lights, and the door she was meant to open wasn't one she could single out among the hundreds like it.

Someone had been in there. It was a logical leap to assume that someone was *him*.

And yet, the more she watched *him* (close, but keeping a peculiar distance, *what are you waiting for* ?) she wasn't so sure he was the culprit.

Whoever it was slipped through her fingers like water, smoke, sand. She knew it now. Felt it like an itch she couldn't scratch.

The spray from the shower head pit-pattered against her skin, turning her pink and hot.

Patience wasn't her virtue, although she knew she had to embrace it. El wouldn't stop watching them as they watched her, wouldn't even *dream* of taking this lying down – but she had to be smart, and not give in to her impulses and rage.

They were playing a game. She needed to learn it, so she could beat it.

Thursday was suffocating.

"Do you want something to drink?" *Restless*. That's what she was. It was a slow, quiet simmer under a tight lid, and the focus on ensuring her moods didn't interfere with the electricity or radio waves weren't suffice distraction. Neither was school work. School itself had an atmosphere so thick with tension not even the expected excitement of upcoming senior activities was enough to get them to forget.

Will, on the other hand, seemed immersed in filling the pages of his sketchbook, pencil pushing against paper in an intense fury of creativity. From her vantage point she noticed the rough outlines of characters. "No thank you," he answered. "There's Sprite in the fridge if you want, though?"

She didn't. Not really. He seemed to sense her apprehension too, so he let his pencil rest.

"Antsy?"

El squirmed from her spot on the floor and pushed hair behind her ears for the umpteenth time. "Very."

He nodded, nibbling on the inside of his cheek. "Should I stop?"

"Stop what?" she warily asked, finally shutting her neglected textbook.

Will gestured to his drawings with a wince. "This. My project. Even thinking about it seems in poor taste and just... the timing's pretty

crappy, isn't it?"

Her brows went up before furrowing, and she stood on her knees to crawl towards the edge of the bed, the two of them leveled eye to eye. "No," Eleven protested. The vehement certainty of her words almost choked a laugh from him. "It's perfect timing. Screw The Man. You don't stop, okay? We all kind of need this, Will."

It wasn't just a thing for school. He needed to do it for himself, and a version of their story brought to life on paper wasn't the worst thing. Maybe it'd remain a college project and nothing more, or maybe he'd go so far with it one day that it'd be sold in stores for the world to see.

Either way, she refused to let the circumstances rob him of those chances.

"Want to see what I've got so far?" he proposed after a minute of contemplation, knowing he couldn't argue against her. If there was one thing Will learned quickly was that she was honest - sometimes to a fault - and what she said was what she meant. "I mean, it's not too much since Mike and I haven't had a chance to discuss things story-wise but I was getting some designs ready if you want to look."

Interest peaked, El smiled her dimple smile and readied to hoist herself up on the bed, until -

You there?

Distantly, she swore she could hear the sound of an engine.

"El? You okay?"

Here.

"Door," she warned and stood straight. Moments later, the doorbell rang through the house. Will took her extended hand as help off the bed, nerves twisting his face into a grimace. "I think I'm gonna need that Sprite for my stomach."

"Surprised you wouldn't want something stronger," he darkly quipped and scooped only the essential art supplies. The sketchbook, and a

pencil to scribble with.

"William the Rebel, are you offering?"

"If only I had something *to* offer."

They shuffled down the hallway and into the living room just in time. Awkward courtesies between adults were being exchanged, and it hit El that she hadn't actually *seen* Mrs. Wheeler in awhile. She looked lovely as always; curled hair, flawless makeup, a light spring cardigan draped neatly over her arm.

A forced smile was the cherry on top of the model housewife.

And it was that forced smile that, once directed to her, made El freeze. She knew that smile. She had picked apart every single past interaction she could remember, and in many of them the smile was the same. *Forced*. It wasn't as if their relationship had ever been particularly difficult. She had always been polite and helpful, either with household errands or Holly, but the woman had kept her at an arm's length and now she knew why.

It didn't make her feel very well.

Warm lips against her cheek broke the spell, and it was then that she sheepishly acknowledged the presence of her beanstalk boyfriend. "Hi," El greeted with a rare sense of self-consciousness. He looked no different than he did earlier that day - striped shirt, corduroy pants, the same lines of broody concern etched in his face.

His mother was watching them. Mike didn't seem to care.

"Jane," Mrs. Wheeler addressed with an air of neutrality. "And Will, it's good to see you."

"Karen, please, sit?" Joyce suggested, the ring of her voice soothing and light, and she was reaching for her purse for folded cash. "And why don't you kids go out for a bit? Come back in an hour, hour and a half or so?"

Already at the table was Hopper, out of uniform and closely intimate with the ashtray. He'd quit soon - later. "Go do some kind of

responsible teenage activity."

"That's kind of an oxymoron," Will remarked after pocketing his mother's cash. "But we'll figure something out. Right, guys?"

"We won't be far," Mike added curtly, taking his girlfriend by the hand.

The only thing El could manage was a wordless nod. It was a shit time for coherency to fail her but it was, and she hadn't realized how eager she'd been to get out of what she considered a second home until their feet were officially outside, and the door behind them officially shut. It felt like a blur, a dream, and then the fresh air hit and sobered her up.

True to his word, they didn't go far. They stopped at the edge of the cement porch to look at one another.

Will spoke first. "We're not actually going anywhere, are we."

"My mom's in your house about to be told that my girlfriend's a telekinetic with the government after her, that you were possessed by the mother of all monsters in a different dimension that apparently exists, and we - including my sister - has had our lives threatened by *both* entities, so...nope."

As if the three of them were in sync (or at terms with the fact that *this was their lives*), they shrugged.

"Yep," he nodded. "That's pretty fair."

It was by Eleven's suggestion that they wait it out in the blazer. With a keyless *click* , the backdoor fell open for them to settle as comfortably as they could. Their legs dangled, the conversation steering towards the contents of the sketchbook and together, they waited.

With only parents under the roof, the temperature dropped from lukewarm to subzero. Hopper made the first attempt to break the ice.

"You've got questions"

"I have a lot of questions," retorted Karen icily as she slung her cardigan over the chair. She finally took that advised seat, posture rigid and arms resting flat on the table's surface. "And I'm not entirely convinced your answers to them will justify you holding secrets about my son and daughter behind my back."

Too wound up, Joyce chose to remain on her feet, leaning against Hopper's chair. "We didn't take keeping anything from you lightly, Karen."

"I'm not entirely convinced of that, either."

"Look," he sighed. "I get it. You're pissed. You've got every right to be. But if you want answers, then we need you to listen, and we need you to keep an open mind."

"A *very* open mind," Joyce emphasized (maybe even pleaded, because this wasn't going to be easy). "Abandon everything you *think* you know. Right now."

"Everything we did - every secret we've kept - has been, and always will be, for their safety. Even if you walk out of this house hating our goddamn guts, you've got to be on board with *keeping* those secrets. For them. Always them."

It didn't escape Karen how ominous their warnings sounded and maybe, *maybe* if she were in a better mood she would take that into consideration - but the fact was that she wasn't, and after all this time her patience had finally run out. "Don't underestimate what I'll do for the safety of my kids."

The drowned echo of laughter was heard from out the window, and the sight of them beyond the parted curtains caught her attention for the briefest moment.

(Mike, Jane, Will; piled into the back of the Chevrolet with trunk's hood hovering over them, *smiling* , looking their age, her son holding hands tightly with the girl he supposedly kept in their basement, one of his best friends pointing at a page, surely the subject of their entertainment.)

"Or yours," she finished with a little less animosity.

Joyce almost smiled. "We know."

With a comforting squeeze to his shoulder, Hopper folded his hands and took the lead. "Let's start when Will went missing."

November, 1983.

Mike hadn't expected the ambush.

(Of the friendship variety.)

"Hey, shitheads!"

A gathering of three - himself, El, Will - had somehow turned into a gathering of *seven* thanks to the addition of Lucas and Max pulling up in one car as Dustin and Steve rolled up in another. He wanted to know who the *hell* invited the entire cavalry over, and the response, unsurprisingly, left him warm.

"Party members are in need of assistance," proclaimed Dustin, handing out everyone's respective milkshake. "It is forever our duty to provide that assistance. This assistance comes in the form of shakes and fries because, uh, we don't know what else the hell to do."

Steve scratched the back of his neck. "Your sister called. I'm here in her place."

"Thanks?" Mike mumbled around his straw, cramped in his spot with Max deciding she needed to invade their space and squish El against him. It was somewhat pleasant, even if it was stuffy and the evening wind only cooled them so much. "I guess."

Lucas was on top of the mustang's hood, swirling a fry into his vanilla shake. "Providing assistance also includes us being character witnesses to El's lack of treason."

"That's sweet," Eleven replied, rolling her lips together to fight a grin. "I guess."

"Any updates? I take it you haven't gone American Spy and eavesdropped on their conversation with your mind powers?" asked Steve, jutting a thumb over his shoulder and towards the house.

"I don't want to," she answered him plainly. That reasoning was enough. Most knew better to not prod too deep.

"It's just been quiet," Mike went on, swapping malts with El (his was peanut butter, hers was strawberry) as somewhere along the conversation, a mental *can I have a taste?* question had been exchanged. "Which has me thinking that Will's mom and Hop are still doing all the talking while mom's...processing."

His mouth felt oddly dry, even while sipping on cold milkshakes. His mother was *in there*, being told everything he worked so hard to keep her from knowing and there was no way in hell he could go somewhere else to 'kill time' while it was happening.

He worried about what knowing would do to her. To their family.

How much would things change; if it'd create a wider, deeper rift between his parents.

If she'd be mad at him. At Nancy.

If she would reject El.

If you want me to, I can look.

Mike shook his head. *It's fine.*

Okay, came the softness of her voice, knowing he wasn't and knowing he was trying to be.

Then came Will, doing his best to provide both an optimistic and realistic point of view. "It's not the worst thing, your mom knowing. I mean, she'll actually *get it* for once. It might take awhile to reach that point, but with everything that's happening I don't think an extra person on our side keeping an eye out is a bad thing."

"Isn't it a huge weight off the shoulders, anyway?" Maxine contributed, looking around the other girl to Mike. "Seriously, you

and El are basically telepathically married and we all know that's not changing, ever. If the whole secret doesn't come out now, it'll come out later and all things considered? Better she find out about it this way."

Logic was currently at odds with raw emotion, but he supposed they were right. Better now than later, better to have a conversation about it than witnessing something without warning, better truth than lies because he preferred honesty overall. Their *friends don't lie* motto was strictly for the inner-circle; they were all wise enough to know that they needed to tell lies outside of their circle out of necessity.

"Telepathically married," Steve echoed, the words falling off his tongue strangely. "Is that even a -"

"Oh, it's a thing," Dustin assured him, unfazed. "We weren't even invited to the telepathic wedding. What a bunch of jerks, right? Are we even going to be invited to the real one?"

Mike's freckled cheeks colored a bit but he rolled his eyes anyway, because he was (mostly) used to the obnoxious teasing. "With the way you're talking? No. Anyway, can we just change the -"

"So you *are* getting married."

"What?"

"Let's successfully change the subject from Mike's mom to his marital status. All in favor, please raise your hand."

"I really fucking hate all of you, put your hands down -"

One hand went to grab his arm. The tightness robbed his attention. It was El, unbothered by the commentary, and her voice powerful enough to hush the group by uttering one simple name: "*Mike*."

The front door opened.

A/N: apologies for the late update! my laptop has been on the fritz and march has been very busy in general, and I've been working on this chapter month long and I've got chapter twelve - karen's reaction - in the

works. i was tempted to include it in this one, but i feel like that will need to be a focus on its own, especially between mikey and his mom. and i wanted to give myself more time to make sure the next chapter has extra juicy content.

also i'm too damn old to tumblr right but if anyone wants to be mileven trash with me, i'm linachupi and i'm probably already following a lot of you and re-blogging content. :p

12. Unfiltered, Irrepressible, Heartfelt

Eleven had been the first to notice.

It started with a shuffle behind the curtains. The flutter of fabric and figures moving that caught her eye - which then, in turn, transformed the voices of her friends into white noise - and squinting, she could make out the looming outline of her father. His hand was positioned through his greying hair (a tell-tale sign of his frustration) and on the periphery of the window were arms motioning (*anger*, that's what it was) with fingers pointing in what she assumed was *accusation*.

That was when she had an inkling that something was happening. *It's over*, she thought, failing to communicate that in the two-way link she maintained with the almost-man that was her boyfriend.

Her fingers had dug into his arm, and it was the weight of her voice calling his name that quieted the group. His muscles stiffened under her touch.

Then the door flew open, and that was when she knew for certain: her inkling was right.

It was over.

"Karen, wait -"

"Don't you dare," she spat, spinning around on the tip of her heels. Ashy brown curls swung in the air like whips, and her eyes - rich and dark, her son's a spitting image - glassy and incensed. "Don't you *dare*, Joyce."

The moment was mother to mother, and it was saturated with love, and anguish, and that instinct etched into their very being to protect.

Everyone heard. Not everyone kept quiet.

"*Mom*," Mike stepped forward, meeting some resistance with El's reluctance to relinquish his arm (fueled by the very same instinct,*protect*) yet he didn't let that stop him. His friends were

rightfully mute. Will was the only other one who dared move his feet, ready to be at his mother's side to defend her from a potential vocal onslaught.

It never came.

Perhaps the sound of her son's voice was to thank for keeping her somewhat grounded, because Karen Wheeler had *many things* to say but none of them were said - despite the quiver of her lips, the flare of her nostrils, the need to scream and shout and shake the shoulders of someone she thought as a friend. Their audience was the children of the story she'd been told (sans Nancy, and Jonathan) and she couldn't lose it in front of them.

Joyce was bone-still at the threshold of the house. Hopper wasn't far behind, acting as a towering safeguard over the small woman.

Karen swallowed thickly, straightened, and smoothed the wrinkles of her cardigan.

He tried again. "Mom, please, I know it's -"

"Get in the car."

Mike knew that tone. It wasn't his request. Defiance was his knee-jerk reaction, up until she turned to him - seeing her poorly mask the hurt on her face subdued him. The guilt gnawed him raw.

And it made him feel like shit. This was his *mother*. He hated seeing her this way.

She needs you.

He looked to El, the height difference forcing his gaze downward. *You need her too*, she added without moving her lips.

"*Michael.*"

"I think they're, um." Dustin knew he shouldn't have opened his mouth, although it didn't change the fact that he *did* and the pressure he felt under Mrs. Wheeler's blazing stare made him want to shrink back into his shirt like a turtle. "I think they're talking."

Lucas and Max, in a beautiful display of how in sync their relationship could be when things were going smoothly, both whacked him on each arm. Steve pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Excuse me?" Karen asked, incredulous.

You can do this. I'll wait for you tonight.

"I'll explain what he means later," Mike voiced before anything *else* slipped. El let him go, but not before he brought her hand up to kiss - a subtle gesture, yet powerful. That fear and disquietude that had been festering dissolved. It had to. "I'm coming. See you guys tomorrow, yeah? Don't even bother fighting over my fries. El's got dibs."

No one dared to even pretend they were disappointed. They all felt awkward; he, on one hand, had an air of confidence that implied he had his shit together or was at least *really fucking good* at pretending he did. That was the Mike Wheeler way of handling unorthodox situations, along with a brave face and sheer stubbornness.

Karen didn't stray from path towards the car. He met her there, holding the door open for her and closing it after she was tucked in and buckled. Neither of them looked at anyone.

(She could hardly look at *him*.)

They disappeared into the road. A breath of air was collectively exhaled among the group. Will went to his mother, and Hopper to his daughter. The strong whiff of smoke and tobacco, plus the sound of heavy steps, gave his presence away.

El felt like she knew the answer to the question, but she whispered it anyway. "Don't lie. How did it go in there?"

"Eh." He knew better than to sugarcoat. "Could have been worse."

It could always be worse.

The car ride home was silent.

Mike didn't bother with the radio. Small talk was obviously out of the question. His mother still refused to meet his eyes - falsely captivated by the sight of trees out the window, the earthy colors blurring together - and he couldn't *take* it anymore, knuckles bulging from how tightly he was grabbing the steering wheel.

So he asked a stupid question. "Are you okay?"

How *else* was he supposed to start?

Karen snorted (almost a laugh, almost a sob) and bit her thumb like she was suppressing unbearable pain.

His throat tightened.

"What the *fuck*, Michael?"

And he wasn't expecting *that*.

It wasn't as if Karen Wheeler was incapable of cursing, no, that wasn't it - he'd heard her slip before, always apologetic or under the assumption her children weren't around to overhear. Before, though, she didn't know what she knew now, and Mike realized more than most that *what the fuck* was a pretty reasonable and human way to react to everything.

"Not to be a smartass but," he winced, "was that an actual question...?"

"Think about your answer." Mom-tone, even through the sniffing and wiping of her eyes, careful not to make an inky mess with her mascara. "And answer me when we get home."

He got the hint.

She wasn't ready. Mike didn't have the certainty to say *he* was, either, despite all his attempts to prepare himself. He rehearsed the words over and over, cycling through the different scenarios, each where he explained and justified his actions over the years. He still struggled with it.

When they arrived at the house, Karen let her emotions show through

the fine art of slamming things. The car door, the front door, her purse on the table, the cabinets in the kitchen up until she found one with treasured wine she effortlessly uncorked. He was only steps behind her, watching.

Holly wasn't home. His father wasn't either. The note on the fridge with childish scrawl let them know she was a couple houses down with the infamous Erica Sinclair, and the blinking light on the phone had been a message from Ted Wheeler himself - *late night at the office, don't wait up for me.*

"Well?"

She didn't look *too* angry; more like upset, in a morose way. She was bleary-eyed with pink nose, swirling the Chardonnay in her glass and debating whether she wanted to daintily sip or thirstily chug.

Hands pocketed, he leaned against the kitchen counter. "Well?"

"Your answer. Have you thought about it?"

"I mean..." Mike sighed, knocking his head back. "I've always kind of thought about how I'd answer you? If you ever found out about everything. I thought about it more over the past week and, honestly, I don't know, mom. I'm just...sorry."

One of her finely groomed brows rose. "Sorry?"

"For lying," he clarified with an awkward shrug. "As a rule I don't like doing it, except this was kind of a necessary thing. Keeping secrets. Making up cover stories. I'm never going to regret doing what I can to keep her safe, but I'm sorry that what we kept from you hurt you."

"Michael, I'm -" Karen sucked in a shaky breath of air, setting the glass down to cover her face and *think*. There were so many things to address (*her*, for one thing), so many more questions she had to ask, but they had to take it one step at a time. "There's a part of me that understands, as crazy as it all is. And the other part *is* hurt, but I'm hurt because you're my son and I want to protect you and your sisters and I wasn't *able* to. You and Nancy went through so much and I didn't know enough to *be there* for you."

She cried then. She tried not to, but her shoulders shuddered and her whimpers were muffled into her hands and it lasted for all two seconds before she collected herself. It was the Karen Wheeler way of handling unorthodox situations - trying her best to pretend like she had her shit together for the sake of everyone else. He had gotten that from her.

Mike's throat felt tight again. This time there was a knot lodged in it, one he couldn't rid himself of.

"I feel like I *still* don't know," she carried on, finding a tissue to wipe the salty wet mess of her face, mascara be damned. "They told me - well, they told me many things - but I'm done with their version. I want to hear it from you."

(And one day from Nancy, because her daughter had to help cover up the actual cause of death for her best friend and went through it all too, good fucking god.)

You can talk to me. She had tried to get him to for so long, and for the first time in forever he felt like he actually *could*.

"Yeah," he nodded, finding his conviction again. "Yeah. Okay. Let's sit down?"

They sat across from one another at the dinner table, and he thought of the night that led them to this - when he announced his plans with El, and the reaction it yielded from his mother. Her tears had been from all the secrecy and necessary lies. Now, they were because she *knew* and struggled to wrap her mind around it.

Karen brought the bottle of wine with her. He bit his tongue about it, not at all fond how it had become a common occurrence seeing her with a glass at least once throughout the days (except he also couldn't argue against the cause of it). "I'm listening," she gestured before letting her hands fall to her lap. "All you have to do is talk. Pick where you want to start."

He mulled it over. He had an idea of the explanation she wanted.

"We found her in the rain," Mike began, remembering back to that

day. It was cold and they'd been, drenched, her most of all; buzz-cut hair, scared, the flashlight shining over her face. "We did our own search for Will when he went missing but we found her instead. All alone in the woods, no shoes. Just this huge t-shirt from Benny's. He found her first, you know. Until *they* showed up looking for her. She saw them kill him."

All because the man dared to be a good human being, trying to help a damn kid. Another dead person at their hands, and his death covered up to hide the truth.

"The guys thought the whole thing was fishy and wanted to leave her there, but she was *freezing* and it looked like she needed help. I gave her my coat, brought her home, we thought she was mute but that..." He shook his head. "That wasn't it. The asshole that raised her in a lab controlled what he taught her, so her speech was kind of limited and I had to explain to her what a *friend* was. I don't know if you've ever seen it but she's got a tattoo on her wrist, right here."

His finger tapped right above his pulse.

"The number eleven. That's what she said her name was. I nicknamed her El for short. Jane's her birth name - um, Hopper told you everything about her mom, right? Everyone else knows her as Jane but she's totally cool with us calling her El."

(Not long ago she had told him it was one of the best things he'd ever given her; that name. She would always be more *El* than she was ever Jane, or Eleven.)

"The supposed miscarriage, and the experiments she underwent during her pregnancy," Karen nodded dazedly, recalling the explanation and the feeling of having been sick to her stomach. "Those experiments, that's what made - ?"

She couldn't say it. It didn't feel *real*, honestly, the whole concept of it, but it had been a prominent theme in the tale of events. *Powers*. Dimensions, and monsters. Government personnel hiding some terrible secret was one thing. The rest was straight out of the comics and movies her son loved so much. Pure fiction, imaginative nonsense.

Thinking about it made her pour another drink.

Mike wasn't afraid to call it what it was. "Made El telekinetic? Yeah, and Ms. Terry's got some abilities to a degree. I know there's one other out there, but El's kind of power is..."

Terrifying, was what she thought.

"Awesome," was what he said instead, breathing the word out in what could only be admiration. "I mean, she can do more than move things in her mind. She can find people, mom."

"And open...doors to another world? Full of... *things*?"

It was evident in her voice - the skepticism and fear. Mike wasn't naive. He heard the hint of blame too, and his hands curled into a fists over the table. "That wasn't her fault," he defended, jaw ticking. "Dr. Shithead forced her to make contact with something on the other side when she didn't want to and trust me, she *still* blames herself for it."

He knew she needed time. It was a logical assumption. Expecting her to immediately embrace every detail down to the last, gory bit wasn't fair. Things were happening, things were *changing* - but there were points he wanted to clarify, and others he wanted to emphasize.

It involved honesty. Unfiltered, irrepressible, heartfelt honesty.

"She saved us," he continued after a pause, having tested the lapse in conversation to see if she would retaliate in *some* way. She hadn't. *Guess she meant what she said, wanting to listen.* "El did. A lot, actually. Saved me from literally falling off a cliff, flipped a van over our heads when it was coming right at us with no intention to even stop. Saved us from government agents pointing guns at us, and she saved us from the monster. The Demogorgon."

Mike plucked at his watch. It was the same one from that very time, only just a couple notches wider to accommodate his grown wrist.

Black ash falling like snow. Its screams, her screams. Obviously, she survived. But her willingness to sacrifice it all, go toe to toe with a monster not only once but twice - it stuck with him, and the love he

had for her was equal to the fear he carried of losing her *because* of that.

There was a change in his face that didn't go unnoticed. Karen pushed the bottle and glass aside, reaching across the table for his hand. He let her hold it, feeling a little silly. Kind of like a kid again.

"She disappeared that night. Lucas and Dustin were always afraid to say it, but I knew what they thought. That she died protecting us. I couldn't think that. That would mean giving up on her and I...couldn't. I couldn't do it. I promised her too much."

The Snow Ball. A home. A bed of her own, actual food (funny that she had all that now and still preferred frozen waffles). Back then he was naive, and thought that after everything was done his family would take her in and it would be okay. It didn't take him long to learn that it wasn't that easy. It would never *be* that easy.

"After that, well..."

He hadn't been the same. How could he? Karen knew the following year had been difficult. His moods were awry, his rebellion uncharacteristic, and she had chalked it up to the stress of Will's disappearance and the insistent questioning of authorities. That barely scratched the surface - the god awful truth was buried deep, and proved to be darker than her wildest suspicions.

Her heart broke for her children. Furiously.

"She used to sleep in that fort. It's why I didn't want you to take it down," Mike confessed. "She can alter waves with her mind. It was how she showed us Will was alive, by channeling his voice through the supercomm. And I thought that if I spoke into it on an empty channel she'd hear me, and she'd tell me if she was there. If she was okay. I tried every night for a year and, uh, that's...not an exaggeration. I reached out for her for three hundred and fifty three days. I kept count."

"Michael -"

"She did, too. She listened. *Every night*, mom." It wasn't some fleeting

high school romance with an expiration date. It wasn't something that was going to fizzle with college in the horizon, and he'd never just *grow out* of his feelings. "I saw her for the first time again when Mrs. Byers' house was surrounded. She came to save us, and saved us again when she faced another monster and closed the Gate. Except that time she came back, has been with us since and I'm not losing her again."

One could argue he probably shared too much there, but the list of all fucks he gave was purely non-existent - she wanted to know, and he *needed* her to know.

El wasn't going anywhere.

Karen released his hand, palms sweaty as she withdrew to hide her trembling mouth. On the opposite end, Mike stopped talking. Saying more would only overwhelm her. She was already overloaded, and he didn't want her polishing off the rest of that alcoholic grape juice in one sit.

"You love her."

"I've established that, yeah. It's not up for debate."

He was always so defensive when Jane (*should* she call her El?) was brought up, although she supposed she could see why now. "I'm not trying to debate anything," she sighed, keeping her calm. "You know that a future with her will be difficult, right?"

Wanting what was best for her kids wasn't a crime. It was a mother's natural wish for them to be happy, healthy and most importantly, *safe*. Despite all the love Michael had for the girl he pulled from the rain, Karen didn't see still waters and smooth sailing for their relationship - not unless the ties that bound them were cut and now she knew for sure it wasn't happening.

It was a concoction of conflicting feelings all starting with how *proud* she was of her son. He was strong, selfless, empathetic; he'd do anything for his friends, and loved powerfully without a lick of shame. In place of the little boy that fit perfectly in her arms was a man so certain of what and who he wanted.

But she was petrified of what that decision would do to him.

Mike shrugged a shoulder. "Like it hasn't been difficult since the very beginning? I know what I've gotten myself into. Just because things can get hard doesn't mean it's not worth it, and she's *always* going to be worth it."

That was the end of that. Karen wouldn't press on. She was too afraid of coming off as antagonistic, and the last thing she needed was unintentionally igniting a fight. She didn't have the fortitude for it. In the end it wasn't even about *her* - it was about Mike, and how everything that happened changed him.

Nodding numbly, she met the bottom of the glass with a final gulp. "One last question for the day."

"Yeah, of course," he blinked and scooted his chair closer into the table. "Anything."

"What did Dustin mean earlier?" It hadn't been a priority to discuss but she didn't just forget, either.

"Oh. That."

"Yes, that." Her frown deepened. "What's with that face? Is it something that's bad -"

"No, no," he quickly corrected, waving his hands sheepishly. "It's not bad. It's just a small detail. Everyone kind of teases us about it, and sometimes we don't notice that other people notice, so..." Mike tapped the side of his head. "It's nothing harmful to either of us. We're, um, connected."

"What?"

"Telepathically, I guess? When we're close we can project thoughts to each other and, I don't know, it happened over time. I think it started when she was gone for that year and listened to me anyway." Mike had thought he was losing his mind, thinking he could feel her. Turns out that feeling had been validated and the entire time it *was* her, and the link only strengthened with time. "It's pretty cool."

"Oddly," Karen spoke after a moment, bursting into a small, mirthless laugh with a hint of distress, "that's not the craziest thing I've heard today."

There was a drizzle that carried into the late night, the mist a ghostly blanket outdoors and cooling the walls. Sleep wouldn't come for her, not until her walkie-talkie crackled to life and the voice she awaited made himself known on the other side.

In effort to ignore her struggling patience, Eleven found comfort through their landline phone, the cords so long she was able to pull the receiver into the sanctity of her itty-bitsy bedroom and keep the door barely cracked. Hopper didn't mind. The television was his own mindless distraction.

(Sleep for him would maybe come once he heard an update from her kid's scrawny boyfriend. He worried, too.)

"Steve's planning to take me on a tour around his union this weekend," said the person at the other side of the phone. It was Max. The unease was skyrocketing through the roof - for some more than others - and she knew El needed the distraction so, really, who *gave* a shit about the time? "It's out in Terre Haute but he gave me a brochure and looks cool, I guess. It's work you can travel with."

"That welding stuff?" El's back was pressed against the headboard of her bed, dressed in gray sweatpants and a shirt that once had brighter colors. "I think you just want to learn how to use a blowtorch."

"What's your point, Hopper?" That smirk could be *heard* in the redhead's voice. "But whatever, it's just something to think about. Trade schools seem more about the hands on work and the pay's pretty good. If I went that path I'd have to pummel through the testosterone, though, because it's a *maaaan's* field."

"You pummel through testosterone on a daily basis," she chuckled, squishing the phone between her ear and shoulder. Her hands roamed free to flip through pages of a book. "It's just an option anyway, right? You're giving yourself the time to explore like you

wanted."

"Yeah, and I told Lucas about it and he thinks I should check it out." Max must have been having a late night snack of some kind, El could *hear* the chewing. "It's the mobility of it that he's liking."

"For the long-distance thing?"

"The idea's gotten less scary, if you can believe it."

El curled a finger around the ringlet cord. "What's changed?"

"Well, he got over his well-tailored plans of the future being shaken up by yours truly." Lucas had a *vision* of how things would go, and Max had a reserve of festering insecurities and uncertainties that blew up into a shitshow of arguments and almost break-ups. Their relationship had endured slurs and outright hatred from those who'd be more than happy to spit on interracial couples, and while it had never been *easy*, they refused to let it wear them down. Letting distance do the trick seemed like giving up. "Everything that's happening puts it into perspective, too. I've got a new motto that I think is gonna work out."

"Go on."

"If you wanna be with someone, sometimes you gotta be prepared to fight to make it work. I think that's a pretty universal fact we could all relate to. I'm prepared to literally and metaphorically punch someone for Lucas."

"Don't act like you haven't done both already," El cooed. "You're so romantic when you want to be."

Hey.

"Shut up. Anyway, to avoid the bore of an introspective talk about feelings -"

Hey, pretty lady.

"- can we talk shit about those prom posters? Seriously. The Dirty Dancing theme's just going to be an excuse so people can screw with

their clothes on the dance floor and impregnate each other."

Pay attention to me.

"Can you hold on for a minute?" As eloquent as Max's rant was beginning to sound, her attention was elsewhere - mainly towards the culprit responsible for the words invading her mind, his pale face a stark contrast from the darkness beyond her bedroom window.

El had eased off the bed to approach, phone receiver held by her fingers, and it was with a twitch of her head that the locks were undone and the glass slid up.

"What's up? Did Mike come through?"

The way he tossed one leg inside and slid his body in, all long-legged and lanky, was seamless; that was what you'd call years of mastering the practice of *sneaking-into-your-girlfriend's-bedroom-while-trying-to-not-wake-up-her-cop-father*.

"Um, sort of."

There was a moment of pause.

"He's at your window, isn't he?"

"Just got inside, actually."

"Woow. He's so predictable I could gag. Okay, well, I'm gonna let you go so you guys can have your moment. See you lovebirds tomorrow. Try not to keep the chief up with your rambunctious lovemaking."

"We draw the line *somewhere*, Max."

"Do you, though?"

"Bye." The call ended.

Mike was damp. The sweatshirt he used for cover was immediately shed (next to the backpack he set onto the floor) and he went to shake off the faint wetness of his hair - giving him the rare sight of

waves, a step below curls - but he was barely able to when he felt the loving impact of an embrace, arms circling around him tight.

His scent was of rain and forest, a hint of his personal soap in the mix, and she didn't think she would be ready to let him go that night *at all*. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Mike replied, his hands smoothing up her arms and over her shoulders, up her neck and to playfully tease the the brunette bun knotted atop her head. *Pretty lady*, even when she was getting ready for bed and wearing an old pair of pajama sweats he'd outgrown forever ago. "Yeah, I'm okay. Sorry I didn't call ahead of time but I just...really wanted to see you."

"This is better than a call," she assured him. El would *always* prefer the entire package that accompanied the sound of his voice. "Does your mom know you're here...?"

"Only if she notices I'm gone," he shrugged.

A presence at the door caught their attention. In the past they'd pull apart, and he'd be trying to hide (or escape) and she'd be bound to the *don't lie* oath that got them both in trouble except *this time*, they stood their ground with no intention of covering anything up, or jumping out the window to avoid the paternal wrath of Jim Hopper.

The man wasn't *mad* when he poked his head in, per se, but there was a clear look of exasperation. "Ever heard of the door front door, Wheeler?"

"Would you have really let me in?"

"Any other night, no," he plainly admitted. "Special circumstance gives you a pass. Been waiting for you to call El, although I had a fifty-fifty bet with myself that you'd be sticking to your usual plan of attempting to enter undetected."

"...you say 'attempt' like I've actually never been successful."

"You act surprised at the chance that you *haven't* been," Hopper sneered. To say that making Michael Wheeler scowl and squirm uncomfortably never gave him a drop of joy would be a flat out lie.

El rolled her eyes at them, gathering the phone and squeeze past her father to return it to its originally post. "How'd it go with your mom?"

She had come back in time for the answer to that question, mentally urging for him to get comfortable. Hopper didn't protest at the sight of him removing his waterlogged sneakers.

"She's got a lot to think about," sighed Mike, visibly drained. It had been a rough day. "We're definitely not done talking about it, and she's definitely not done with you or Mrs. Byers, but we can trust her. She just wants to be included in...stuff."

"Her being in the dark of all this is the main reason I'm sporting a brand new asshole today," he grouched. But her request was fair, and expected, and he was relieved to see the kid didn't look like he was a *total* mess. "You two riding to school together?"

(Yes, he noticed the backpack on the ground and figured the intention was to have *some* kind of damn sleepover.)

"If you don't mind?" El piped up in a way all too familiar to the both of them; the small, hopeful voice and whiskey-colored eyes cute and begging. "We'll keep the door open."

Truth be told, she hadn't been the one to convince him. The credit went to the weary boy beside her, exhausted and coming off like a soggy stray seeking solace. The kid needed *something* to get him through it.

Or more accurately, some *one*.

"Don't skip school tomorrow," was what Hopper decided on. There had been a couple times he had spent the night in the past (all under very specific circumstances) but tonight was more for his sake than hers. "Don't be late, either. Bring her by the station after. El's got filing duty."

Mike offered a lazy salute. "Affirmative. Thanks, chief. For everything."

Talking to his mother, letting her yell at him - letting him *stay*, trusting him like this. It all went unspoken, yet Hopper knew. He

nodded and let them be, leaving the door ajar. Keeping it completely open wasn't necessary. They needed a degree of privacy.

(Just enough, though. They might have plans to shack up, but this was *still* his house and they were *still* in high school.)

"You should change," she advised, rummaging through one of her drawers that had hand-me-down clothes from his wardrobe stashed inside. A few still fit him. "C'mon, take these."

"I love you," Mike expressed with a happy sigh, and closed the distance (the space between, the difference in height) to meet her lips. She tasted as sweet as maple syrup and felt like coming home - everything he needed, everything he craved. "I've told you that today, right?"

"You manage to tell me every day," El giggled gently, fingers dancing up his torso. They did circles on his chest, mapped out the contour of collarbone through the fabric, caressed the column of his throat, and felt the comfort of his pulse. "Love you too, Wanna lie in bed and try not to think about anything else?"

His groan was practically euphoric. "God, yes. "

While he swapped his daywear for more appropriate sleepwear, she cleared the bed of books and the one abandoned bottle of nail polish she lost interest in throughout the night. It was always better for Mike to take the side of the bed that allowed him the freedom of dangling. The mattress was twin-sized and the fit always tight, but she never needed much space to toss and turn.

El slid in first. He followed, and they settled side by side - he clutched the back of her shirt, and she cradled his head up against the softness of her bosom and boy, wouldn't that be the perfect spot to suffocate and die in?

"Mm," he murmured pleasantly. "You smell nice."

"Thanks. I showered."

Mike spat a laugh. It was authentic, empty of troubles and unease.

"What? I *did*."

Her nonchalant bluntness always seemed to amuse him. Most of the time it was unintentional, although she couldn't deny that she was pleased with the results. He had lifted his chin, revealing a crooked grin and glinting eyes, his crinkled hair framing the sharpness of his face.

Beautiful, she had come to learn through the years, was an adjective not typically directed at men yet she didn't *care*. No other word could describe him right now.

"It's just the way you said it," Mike replied, interrupting her thoughts. Since they were enveloped by the weight of her flower-printed quilt, he moved his hands - this time up her shirt, not over - for that skin to skin contact. Intimacy without the pursuit of 'funny business.' "I know it hasn't been forever since we've been like this, but -"

"- it still feels like forever," El finished for him and peppered kisses to his face; brows, dotted nose, cheekbones and lips. He made a tickled sound from the attention. "Mike?"

His grin had softened into a sleepy, dopey smile. Things might be total shit, but this moment definitely wasn't one of them. "Yeah?"

There was a soft impishness to her, with a cool sense of smugness that had his mind questioning.

"Make us late tomorrow."

Oh.

Ohhhhh.

Sleepiness interrupted, Mike's were wide open and he had to peek over his shoulder just to make sure there wasn't an enormous mass of grizzly *Chief of Fucking Police* eavesdropping near the cracked doorway.

Coast was clear.

"El Hopper," he began, voice extra hushed in case his worst dreams

came true and the walls did, in fact, have ears. "Are you trying to seduce me into rebellion?"

"Not at this very moment," she quipped. "But I won't need to do much in the morning. Part of you wakes up a little... *excited* already."

"You're shameless. Insatiable."

"Like you aren't -"

He silenced her with a kiss, and it was only half-effective - because they both laughed against the other's mouth, *trying* to keep their volume contained.

That was the rest of their night.

It was kisses and lazy smiles, teases and caresses, warm cheeks and biting back yawns because they were too stubborn to end the moment. Then, the drizzle turned into soothing rainfall, and her voice tapered off into even breaths. Her lids shut and her body went peacefully slack against his own.

Mike, minutes away from his own slumber, was relieved to see it. Her typically turbulent sleeping pattern had worsened; he hated not being there when she struggled with it, and he hated knowing there wasn't much he could even do.

But he was there for the night, ready in case, and one day he'd be there *every* night.

Jim Hopper departed early in the morning.

He checked on them before he left, of course - the door remained slightly open, and when he peeked in they were swaddled in the blanket like a double-stuffed burrito, passed out in a way that almost, *almost* made him chuckle.

Mike at the edge of the bed with the threat of falling, except the arms of the daughter he could barely even *see* behind him seemed to be wrapped around his midsection in a subconscious attempt to keep him off the floor. *What the hell is she even doing, spooning him?*

Jesus christ, those two.

(They'd wake up. Eventually.)

When they did, they took their time. A little *too* much time, but they were all alone and relished taking advantage of an actual bed for once, not just the inside of his car.

Mike honored her request. They arrived at Hawkins High School late, hand in hand, bracing themselves for what would come at them next.